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Abstract

Public school closings due to low academic performance have recently become popularized as a solution to perceived school failure. Using fictionalized concepts of decrepit buildings, unskilled teachers and unmotivated and obtuse students, the business management model favored by the federal government has moved from applied labels of failure with subsequent funding and assistance to full scale shuttering. The public schools that face perdition unquestionably share the same characteristics: they are urban schools with a high percentage of students who receive free/reduced lunch, have low standardized test scores, produce floundering graduation rates, and contain high populations of students of color, English Language Learners and Special Education students. These schools have been vilified as enemies in need of annihilation. These obstacles to success are typically exacerbated by the physical situation of the schools as they are often located in the lowest socioeconomic portions of urban areas. Urban public school districts are losing local control and remain voiceless as their adherence to state education mandates dictates crucial funding in order to operate. This thesis will analyze the culture and community of a public high school in the Northeast closed due to low academic performance using the narratives of teachers and students who worked at and attended the school.

This qualitative case study was conducted through the interviews of four former teachers and four former students to understand their individual experiences within a failing high school. Each response was recorded and coded for claims that opposed popular beliefs regarding low performing public schools. Based on the researcher's hypothesis, stakeholders within the school viewed their experiences much differently than the published data that was used to close the school. Teacher and student relationships were held in high regard and the school itself was

presented by the responders in a significantly more positive context than what was previously regarded as common knowledge based solely on standardized test scores and graduation percentages. The interviews also reveal deficiencies that exist within unlabeled academic institutions (high performing public schools, colleges and universities) that are typically ignored by the media and/or educational policymakers.

**“WE LOST OUR FAMILY”: STUDENT AND TEACHER NARRATIVES FROM AN
URBAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL CLOSED DUE TO POOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

by

Adam S. Lutwin

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Science in Cultural Foundations of Education

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Acknowledgments

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Chapter I

Welcome to Western High School

Introduction

The Western High School football team has not played a home game in six years. Their “home” games are played on the turf of city rivals, with the Homecoming king and queen posing for photos astride the midfield emblems of other schools equipped with beautiful stadiums. The boys soccer team, comprised of refugees and immigrants of African and Asian countries, has won the league title three years straight, yet has never hosted a playoff game. They play home games in a city park with no bleachers, no concession stand and no scoreboard. The outdoor track team practices on the busy street outside of the school’s entrance, setting up hurdles next to abandoned cars while clearing gutter garbage before having their sprints timed.

Western High School runs parallel to a central urban neighborhood riddled with crime, drugs, gangs and half-occupied storefronts equipped with steel bar facades, chain link fences and the occasional snarling guard dog. Walkers dodge trap houses, the curbside waste of former tenants and the overwhelming allure of the street life. It is a quarter long neglected, purposely avoided and forgotten.

The students at Western High School are a societal anomaly, a glitch in the common construct, an inconsistency with what life in America should look like. They are the subculture that strict and unforgiving mandates have sought to eradicate instead of assist. They are poor, lacking in education and resources, unstable, degraded, blamed, dependent and voiceless.

The students at Western High School have deceased Facebook friends, incarcerated relatives, and classmates who have simply disappeared. They are cafeteria connoisseurs; having eaten so many school-prepared meals that their palates are refined enough to create wild,

flavorful combinations and can identify specific leftovers based on texture and appearance. They are masters of colloquialisms, skilled fight-documentarians, and resilient enough to sift through the plethora of negativity that hangs like a low cloud over their school and community.

The morning announcements at Western High School, barely audible above the noise in the hallways, are read in English, Spanish and Arabic. The principal reminds students that bathroom fires are strictly prohibited. Every so often there is a scholarship opportunity for one Western student to attend a high-performing private school nearby. No students ever apply.

Western High School is the poster child for advocacy and supposed successful interventions. The district, state and federal governments, civil rights groups, outside tutoring agencies, motivational speakers, local colleges and Universities and concerned citizens have all entered the school, jotted down notes, typed up official reports, suggested solutions or funding options for the ubiquitous issues plaguing the school and moved their shrugging shoulders elsewhere.

The school has been placed on list after list, failing to reach mandated goals within a strict timeframe. State officials, with stiff suits and minimal teaching experience, have suffocated the staff with blame and accusations, demanding this form or that proof, yet having no answers of their own for how to solve the growing problems. Acronyms, presumed to solve every issue in a heartbeat, change and replace each other so quickly that they are impossible to keep track of. Curriculum modifications, lesson plan templates, scripted delivery, stringent observation schedules, progress charts, staff development, data meetings, and procedural contradictions bewilder veteran staff members, who vividly remember when the cafeteria overflowed with raw sewage every time it rained.

Of late, the school's increasingly low New York State Regents exam scores and a graduation rate of 30% in 2014 (The New York State School Report Card) have forced permanent intrusion from the New York State Education Department, closing the school over the course of three years while a new school, housed in the same building and staffed with new teachers and administrators, emerges in its wake. Students, teachers and administrators collectively mourned the loss of the school for a short period of time before realizing that without their own interventions, staff members would be chaotically placed throughout schools (some more desirable than others) in the district. A school community of enormous resolve, solidarity and dedication was quickly terminated, forever branded as a failure.

As an eleven-year English teaching veteran of Western High School, my professional and personal lives were severely impacted by the State Education Department's decisions. The information included in this introduction came directly from my daily experiences as a staff member in a failing high school. From a front row seat, I have witnessed struggles ignored, voices silenced and decisions wrenched from those who are qualified to make them. I have seen spectacular teachers demoralized. I have comforted students who missed out on an entire lifetime of opportunities because of a single test. Worst of all, I have felt my own passion for urban education dissipate under the hefty weight of blame and lethal mistakes made by those who have never been on a perennially losing side. Western High School will soon be a distant memory, but before that moment takes place, it deserves a brief intermission from the tarnishing statistics and percentages habitually referenced by the public as the rationale for its conclusion. Western has performed miracles and it will again, one last time.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to understand the educational experiences of former students and teachers in a New York State public high school closed in June 2014 due to low academic performance. The shutdown of poor performing schools has been portrayed as a solution to the problem of ineffective teachers and schools, which in turn would give students who have historically struggled with academics a much greater chance at success. Arne Duncan, the United States Secretary of Education from 2009 to 2014, admitted to “closing about 60 schools in Chicago, some for low enrollment and some explicitly because they were failing academically” while serving as Chicago’s Superintendent from 2001 to 2009 (Duncan 2). A dozen of these schools were “reopened with new leadership and staff” and are currently “doing much better,” as reported through higher attendance rates and improved test scores (Duncan 2). School turnarounds are consistently regarded as a “necessary step for the most troubled schools in the nation” (de la Torre and Gwynn 7). As state imposed school closings due to poor academic performance become normalized in larger urban districts across the United States, it is important to preserve the narratives of stakeholders held responsible for the failure, especially since these voices are typically silenced throughout the decision-making and subsequent process of termination.

This study challenges data that has portrayed Western High School as one of the worst performing high schools in the state of New York. It captures significant moments of growth and the harsh realities of urban high schools. It dispels some of the more popular beliefs that have belittled Western High School since its opening in the 1970s, which have generated a culture of contempt and disregard by those outside of its walls. It explores the labels and the shortcomings of the school that preceded the closure, illustrating the neglect that contributed significantly to its

decades of inadequate performance. Staff and student relationships have played a significant role in the school's minimal success, yet have been disregarded in favor of scrutinized test scores and graduation rates. This study aims to reveal the reality of the school from its populace; essentially, the people who matter the most in terms of school reform, yet are heard from the least.

Statement of the Research Problem

Struggling and ultimately failing public schools have been condemned in state capitals and news sources across the United States, creating a massive surge of aversion against teachers and their students. New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo has signaled for “a death penalty for failing schools” (qtd. in Blain 1), further vilifying the school communities who require the most assistance. While the slandering voices outside of low performing and failing schools are deafening, those inside the classrooms remain marginalized. Students and teachers are silenced by their failure, often regarded as failures themselves and thus unable to make their own beneficial decisions. This case study explores the narratives and experiences of four students and four teachers within a failing and subsequently closing public high school in New York State. In this context, a failing high school is defined by the New York State Education Department as reporting a less than 60% graduation rate for three consecutive years (“The State of New York’s Failing Schools 2015 Report” 8). Their perspectives reveal the constant embattlements faced when attending or teaching in a failing school. On the front lines, these individuals have witnessed the best and worst of times. They have overcome more obstacles than they should have. They offer an alternative to the statistical truths that will forever close the doors of unique public institutions of learning.

Methodology

Western High School's population hovers around 1200 students in grades 9 through 12. It is located in a mid-sized, New York State urban center in a district of over 20,000 students who attend over 30 schools, 5 of which are high schools serving grades 9 through 12. As a teacher at Western High School for over ten years, I have managed to remain in contact with numerous students and colleagues, even after they have left the school. Once the staff and students were informed about the impending closing and restructuring of Western High School, they were outraged. The response was overwhelming and I felt that a collection of narratives was necessary and vitally important as public schools enter a new realm of quick conclusions. Towards the end of the 2013-14 school year, numerous colleagues that I had worked with for years, accepted teaching positions at different high schools within the district, having no knowledge of what the restructuring of Western High School would bring. These teachers chose self-preservation, a relatively new concept for Western teachers, while many students and staff equated their situation at Western High School to a sinking ship they had no choice but to go down with. Sentiments of hopelessness increased and most shuffled out of the building on the last day of school that year with boxes of their belongings. Some were veteran teachers approaching twenty years of experience at Western, while others were newer to the school and the profession.

Of the teachers that left the school, I was able to contact four and convince them to participate in a one-on-one interview about their experiences as teachers at Western. I chose teachers who were no longer teaching at Western to insure anonymity and to assuage any of their understandable fears that they may be revealing sensitive information about the school. Three of these teachers had voluntarily moved to other schools within Western's district within the past two years (2012-2014), while one left the district entirely within the past two years. I also

selected four graduates of Western to participate: one from the class of 2009, two from the class of 2014 and one from the class of 2015, who was interviewed shortly after he graduated from the school. These eight primary sources were interviewed individually in an off-campus setting. All interviews were at least 60 minutes in length. They were audio recorded and transcribed and approved by the individual interviewees to assure authenticity. All of the participants' names have been changed to assure their anonymity for the study.

Statement of Potential Significance and Research Questions

Low-performing and subsequently failing school closures are a controversial issue in American public education (de la Torre and Gwynn 5). The general public is inundated with data supporting the shut downs of schools “in crisis” without a tangible examination of why the schools are failing (Ravitch 2). It is commonplace to blame teachers and students for the failure; after all, they are doing the failing work (Kumashiro 8). Policy leaders have created a “broad national contempt for educators” (Payne 147) while untested school reform policies are “embraced triumphantly” simply because they are an “alternative to the past” (Payne 146). As education in the United States adopts the “anything is better” (Payne 149) philosophy of reform, specific subgroups of the educational landscape are decreasingly consulted for their beliefs about functional change. When are teachers and students given a shareholder’s place at the decision-making table? What are some of the positive elements of a school with so many perceived deficiencies? This study is not about solutions; rather, it is about respecting the knowledge and experiences of those labeled as failures. The following interview questions were used for all eight participants:

- 1) What were some of the more memorable experiences you had as a student/teacher at Western High School?
- 2) Describe what it was like to be a student/teacher at Western High School.
- 3) Describe Western High School to someone who has never been there or heard of it.
- 4) Who were some of the people (staff/students) that had the greatest impact on you?
- 5) What is your opinion of the school?
- 6) How was the school unique from other school experiences (resources, relationships, student/teacher body etc.)?
- 7) How would you describe your time in the school?

Limitations

When recruiting subjects for this case study, I made every attempt to select a wide range of racially, ethnically and academically situated participants. One of the students interviewed, one is a Caucasian male who is a college graduate, one is an African-American female currently enrolled in college, one is an African-American male currently enrolled in college and one is a female refugee from an Asian country currently enrolled in college. Of the teachers, I selected one female and three males, all Caucasian. While eight participants represent an extremely small percentage of the people who have worked and attended Western High School since its opening in the 1970s, their narratives indicate a shared experience within a single institution. I opted to pursue a richer, qualitative, interview-based study from a smaller population as opposed to a quantitative survey that reached more respondents. I did not collect narratives from parents, community members, administrators or support staff mainly because teachers and students are

the stakeholders most closely scrutinized by the failing school label. While the subject pool is small in number, it is large in expertise and experience.

Organization of Thesis

Chapter Two briefly covers the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001. After a concise introduction to the philosophies and influences behind the legislation, I have only selected the punitive portions of the Act as these have had the greatest impact on Western High School. This same philosophy applies to *Race to the Top* (RTTT), in addition to other federally mandated executive orders referenced throughout the thesis.

Chapter Three focuses on the narratives of students who graduated from Western High School between 2009 and 2015.

Chapter Four focuses on the narratives of teachers who previously worked at Western High School between 2012 and 2014.

Chapter Five evaluates the findings of the case study with suggestions for further research avenues.

Chapter II

Who Closed Western High School?

“Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.”

(Horace Mann, qtd. in Stabler 70)

Introduction

The power of education has remained one of the strongest core beliefs of the United States since colonial times (Mayberry 25). Public education in the United States has made it possible for “all children, regardless of background and scholastic aptitude, to acquire adequate levels of skills in reading, writing and practical arithmetic” (Beretier qtd. in Mayberry 29) which would subsequently lead to a path of fulfillment and success. The promise of social advancement through education has kept American schools brimming with potential scholars from all backgrounds, assured that through their hard work and dedication, obstacles can be overcome and dreams can be achieved.

As the value and promise of a public school education has grown, so has the apparent need for federal oversight in order to preserve the investment made in our students. Our society has become increasingly reliant on public schools to assuage numerous societal deficiencies and “produce world-class academic achievement regardless of the negative forces bearing down on a school’s particular students,” (Sirota 4) vaulting student and teacher performance into the limelight. A veritable war has been waged over the future of public education, as politicians, economists and corporate stakeholders claim the system is irrevocably broken, while others,

mostly inside of the schools, are asking for more time and resources. Our schools are absolutely critical to our success and “failure puts the United States' future economic prosperity, global position, and physical safety at risk” (Klein and Rice 4). As President Obama has clearly outlined as a major tenet throughout his presidency, “the goal of this administration is to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education” (“Expanding the Promise of Education in America”). This statement was made under the pretense that every child *does not* have access to a complete and competitive education. The failure to prepare our students for global competition leaves them unable to contribute to the greater good of our society, thereby jeopardizing our national security (Klein and Rice 4). Never before have students and teachers played such an integral role in the safety and security of the United States. Students must not only be given the opportunity for success, they must also succeed or our nation risks falling further down the competitive global scale. These collective sentiments of crisis have permeated past administrations, linking the fate of our country with student performance. Public education has become a potent aspect of political platforms, as new and seasoned leaders either idolize or castigate public schools and seek innovations to swiftly repair the largest amount of issues in the least amount of time.

“The modern obsession with schools as the cause and cure of our economic problems” (Mishel and Rothstein 1) began with President Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the primary harbinger of disaster in American schools that outlined the country’s rising educational failure and the potential consequences of these failures. President Reagan stood before television cameras and delivered a sobering message to American households:

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.

The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur – others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

President Reagan claimed that it was lethargy, not the innovative skill of other countries that led to America's global decline. Mary Hatwood Futrell, president of the National Education Association from 1983-1989 wrote in response, "When the report came out, it catapulted the issue of education onto the national agenda" (Graham 1). While *A Nation at Risk* did not have the immediate reform impact that future educational legislation would, it did lead to a host of new reforms over the next 30 years. Public education had been "lambasted" and the administration called for more rigorous and streamlined standards, a stricter focus on standardized testing to measure student performance and a push for more math and science included in the curriculum (Graham 2).

Maris Vinovskis, who advised the American Education Department over three presidential administrations (George Bush and Bill Clinton twice) explained that *A Nation at Risk*, "like the U.S. reaction to the Soviet launching of Sputnik in 1957, galvanized the nation to take quick action by using crisis language that convinced policymakers to push rapid reforms" (Serwach). Vinovskis also claimed that this same mentality pervaded the educational reforms set forth by Presidents George Bush (*America 2000*), Bill Clinton (*Goals 2000*) and George W.

Bush (*No Child Left Behind*) and that no real progress was made, simply “short-term solutions which don’t work” (Serwach 2).

President Bill Clinton’s *Goals 2000*, signed into law in March of 1994, promoted three basic principles: “rigorous academic standards; alignment of curriculum, textbooks and teacher education; and clear student incentives to meet high standards of academic performance (Knudsen 2). On the surface, *Goals 2000* sought to reconcile the inadequacies identified in *A Nation at Risk*; however, unreachable goals, such as 100 percent literacy among students and the end of drugs and violence in all schools caused the Act to fail miserably (Knudsen 5).

The federally mandated *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 was a continuation of America’s relentless goal; to remain competitive in the global economy by producing intelligent, hard working students who quickly progressed into intelligent, hard working adults. The only way to ensure that the nation’s educational goals were being met was “to hold states and schools more accountable for results” (NCLB Requirements for Schools 7). Accountability from this standpoint meant funding and control, both of which a school would lose if specific benchmarks of progress, dubbed Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), were not made by students and schools. These measured results were produced solely through standardized tests. Schools were to remain under local control, but in exchange for federal dollars, the federal government “expected results” (Bush 1). While other federally mandated educational reforms promised change with “no teeth” (“The Battle Over School Choice” 2), NCLB pioneered the current punitive system of labeling schools as failures and punishing them with counterproductive sanctions (Neill 1).

The year to year breakdown of penalties served for non-compliance under NCLB is absolutely essential to understanding the language of failing schools. Schools who meet their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) retain their federal funding for the subsequent year and are

considered to be in good standing (No Child Left Behind [NCLB] 649). Increasingly severe consequences are implemented for schools who do not meet their AYP goals. If a school does not meet AYP for two consecutive years, it must create an improvement plan which includes staff development and scientifically based education resources. Students in that school are then granted the option to transfer and the school is designated “in need of improvement” (NCLB 40). If a school does not meet AYP for three consecutive years, the above improvements remain in place with the addition of federally mandated tutoring for students in addition to more staff (NCLB 70). If a school fails to meet AYP for four consecutive years, it must take at least one serious corrective action, such as replacing “the school staff who are relevant to the failure to make adequate yearly progress,” restructuring “the internal organizational structure of the school” or increasing “the amount and quality of learning time, such as providing an extended school year and before- and after-school and summer programs and opportunities, and help provide an enriched and accelerated curriculum” (NCLB 60). After five consecutive years of failing to meet AYP, the school must completely restructure by replacing staff and administrators and/or turning control over to the state (NCLB 61). This could also include a symbolic name change of the school, assuring that meaningful modifications have been made. Overall, by the end of the 2013-14 school year under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, each public school in the United States was expected to obtain and report 100 percent student proficiency (NCLB 124).

The language of NCLB’s accountability mandates distinguishes two important assumptions about schools in need of assistance. For one, schools that are persistently low achieving are in need of internal restructuring from an outside entity. The school itself must be incapable of providing students with a proper education. Teachers, administrators and other staff

members are held solely responsible for poor student performance on standardized exams and must be eradicated swiftly if benchmarks are not being met. As President George Bush stated during his Presidential campaign in 2000, “if the schools are not fulfilling the promise and hope, if they're not teaching children--then something has to happen. We cannot continue to pour money into schools that won't teach” (“The Battle over School Choice” 3). The culpability of failure is located exclusively within the walls of the school. Secondly, it is assumed that students and parents involved in a failing school community desire nothing more than relocation. They are granted vouchers to attend private or parochial schools or are allowed to transfer to a higher achieving school within the same district. They are not granted any opportunity to be involved with their home school’s improvement process. Typically these are families of lower socioeconomic status who may encounter difficulties accessing better schools. In turn, the federal government has provided numerous lifelines for escape as opposed to lifelines for the development and sustainability of current schools.

In 2011, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan testified before congress that up to 82% of American schools could be labeled as failing under NCLB’s vast array of AYP guidelines (McNeil 1). Even schools with tremendous academic records and high graduation rates could face sanctions if 100% student proficiency was not met (“No Child Left Behind Act, Race to the Top”). Previously in 2009, President Obama sought to assuage some of the blanket penalties enacted by NCLB through his program, *Race to the Top* (RTTT) which grants waivers to schools in jeopardy in exchange for compliance over key policies that include teacher evaluations linked directly to student test scores and the use of nationally developed curriculum and exams, in this case, the Common Core State Standards (“No Child Left Behind Act, Race to the Top”). This was an effort to completely streamline curriculum, testing, and teacher

evaluations under the pretense that all schools can and will produce uniform results. State education departments, already feeling the effects of dwindling annual budgets, competed with each other for federal dollars while scrapping the curriculums and exams their own teachers had written and used themselves for decades. President Obama's administration "pushed back the 2014 deadline for 100 percent proficiency" and focused on implementing the Common Core State Standards in order to get students ready for college or employment by 2020 (McNeil 4).

President Obama recognized and amended some of the apparent flaws with NCLB's accountability system and delayed the punitive course of action for schools failing to meet AYP. Schools performing at the lowest 5% in every state became the target for intervention and assistance from the federal government, as opposed to the much higher percentage of schools under NCLB. Low performance was calculated using a number of different factors, but Western High School easily qualified through the poor graduation rates of its 2002, 2003 and 2004 cohorts. In simpler terms, the graduation rates (measured by students who entered the school as 9th graders and left four years later having earned either a Local or Regents diploma) of Western in 2006, 2007 and 2008 were all below 60% (School Intervention Models 5). In 2010, twenty eight New York schools were designated Persistently Lowest Achieving (PLA) and were awarded School Improvement Grants (SIG) which identified them as "the lowest-achieving schools that have the greatest need and demonstrate the strongest commitment to use the funds to significantly raise the achievement of their students" (Schwartz 2). These schools secured additional state funding but were "required to follow one of the U.S. Department of Education's four turnaround models" (McNeil 5) or risk "revocation of registration" (Schwartz 2).

Individual schools, with guidance from their home districts and the New York State Education Department, selected and initiated one of four models aimed at drastically improving

results in the hopes that they could save themselves from further intervention in a short amount of time. The four options included the “Turnaround” model that called for replacement of the principal and at least half of the staff with an increased focus on professional development and data collection. The second was the “Restart” model, where a school closes and reopens under a new operator, typically a charter school. The third was the “Transformation” model, which replaced the principal and implemented a rigorous teacher evaluation system. The fourth was the “School Closure” model that closes the school immediately and students transfer into higher achieving schools (Federal Funding and Four Turnaround Models 4). Western High School implemented the Transformation model, complete with required professional development hours, induction of new school policies and a revamping of lesson plan structures. Western teachers were required to submit a Curriculum Vita and participate in a panel interview process in order to continue working in the school. 23% of the teachers were either relocated by Western’s administration or moved schools/districts voluntarily (NYSED School Report Card Data 1). The principal was granted special permission to remain at the helm because he had been in charge for less than two years. Under the circumstances, the Transformation model was by far the most popular in New York State because “a school that opts for a transformation model does not close but rather remains identified as persistently lowest-achieving until it demonstrates improved academic results” (Schwartz 3). Western remained open, utilizing much needed funding granted under heavy sanctions.

From 2010 to 2013, Western was visited multiple times per year by state auditing agents to ensure that SIG money was properly funding locally developed success strategies. These were always tense days in the school, with staff meetings outlining exactly what needed to happen in each classroom when members of the State Education Department Integrated Intervention Team

(IIT) entered. The team was comprised of representatives from NYSED, our district, and Special Education and English Language Learner specialists. Every component of the school was scrutinized and rigidly measured using an expansive rubric broken into tenets, similar to the way teacher evaluations and benchmarks had recently been thrust upon the school. The last IIT visit took place over three days in the fall of 2013 and gathered enough supplementary information (see Appendix A) to finalize the plans for Western’s eventual closing.

While examining the IIT report from the fall of 2013, it is important to consider the perspective and language of an “outsider” in regards to Western’s school culture. The Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness (DTSDE) Report of Western High School noted that “school safety continues to be an issue,” and “the school continues to struggle to meet the immediate needs of the school community.” Students were observed “exhibiting intimidating behaviors towards each other” and “vulgarity in classrooms with no intervention by the classroom teacher” did not help the school’s cause. Additionally, “the school does not provide an environment that is conducive to learning,” “the atmosphere in the school did not celebrate and promote positive behavior” and teachers keeping their classroom doors locked during instruction amounted to the impression that Western was completely out of control and necessitated full infiltration by NYSED. Ironically, the report also noted that SIG funding had expired by the fall of 2013 and “the school lost two deans and several security staff” assuring that promoting a positive school culture would be more difficult than ever before. Western was rated Developing (Highly Effective, Effective, Developing, Ineffective) in almost every category during almost every visit (*SED Integrated Intervention Team (IIT) DTSDE Modified Visit 4*). The reports were divulged to Western staff by frowning administrators and reinforced what the staff already knew; we had numerous academic and social issues and not enough resources to solve them all.

By the end of the 2013-14 school year, Western High School had not met any tangible AYP goals in twelve years. Failure to make any academic progress over the three years of additional SIG funding while simultaneously reporting a 30% graduation rate (the worst in its history) compared to New York State's average of 76% (The State of New York's Failing Schools 2015 Report 5), signaled the rapid approach of Western High School's termination as a school. Western had previously pioneered the NCLB designations of deficiency in its home district. It now had the attention of NYS Governor Cuomo and President Obama's administration. While it was not the only school in its district to be labeled developing or worse, no gains were ever made that would typically delay the sanctions any further. Western's home district had to make a final decision.

Consistent with the stipulations of 100.2(p) and 100.18 of NYSED Commissioner's Regulations, Western High School could either close and students would be relocated to other high schools in the district, phase out and be replaced with a new school, employ an Educational Partnership Organization (EPO) to take over the school or completely convert to a charter school. The phase out model chosen by Western's district provided current Western students the opportunity to finish high school in the same building where they started; thus, at the start of the 2014-15 school year, two schools coexisted in the same building. The new school would gain a grade each year while Western lost one. The graduating class of 2017 would be Western's last, closing the school after forty years of serving a zip code whose median household income, \$31,365, is roughly half of New York State's average of \$58,003 (United States Census Bureau).

What do failing schools have in common?

The term “failing school” is a relatively new concept, not widely used until the early 1990s (Kosar 1). Former assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch explained that while a failing school has low test scores and low graduation rates, they also typically enroll a large number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, are African-American and Latino, are English Language Learners and new immigrants and have a high population of students with learning disabilities. Additionally, “a failing school often has twice the number of high-poverty students and many more students who enter the school below grade level” (Wakelyn 4). Failing schools are predominantly located in urban areas of extreme poverty; it may even be safe to say that all failing schools are located in low income areas where the number of children who qualify for free or reduced price lunches approach 75% (Ediger 1).

In the winter of 2015, Governor Andrew Cuomo’s Office released “The State of New York’s Failing Schools 2015 Report,” in order to “expose a public education system badly in need of change.” Presently there are 178 “priority” or “failing” schools in New York State that represent the bottom 5% in test scores and/or graduation rates. Included in those 178 schools are 77 schools that have “been failing for a decade” (see table 1). The state estimates that 250,000 students have passed through these 77 schools in the past ten years, representing “250,000 students who did not have access to the high quality public education that they deserved” (The State of New York’s Failing Schools 2015 Report 3).

Table 1. *Vital Statistics for Western High School (2002-2014)*

School Year	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14
Enrollment	1253	1303	1309	1357	1208	1086	1075	1214	1154	1150	1150	1321
Graduation Rate %	52%	54%	54%	56%	58%	44%	41%	38%	40%	32%	32%	30%
Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch %	65%	64%	70%	68%	60%	71%	73%	73%	81%	82%	82%	83%
ELL %	7%	7%	8%	8%	12%	10%	14%	20%	26%	28%	29%	27%
Students with disabilities	N/A	N/A	N/A	14%	20%	23%	22%	22%	21%	22%	21%	20%
NCLB Designation		SRAP Year 1	SRAP Year 2	SRAP Year 3	SRAP Year 4	SRAP Year 5	SRAP Year 6	RAC Year 1 PLA	RAC Year 2 PLA	RAC Year 3 PLA	Pri- ri- ty	Phase Out

Source: “The New York State School Report Card”

*(SRAP) School Requiring Academic Progress
 (RAC) Restructuring Advanced Comprehensive
 (PLA) Persistently Low Achieving

Western’s district is now home to almost 20 failing schools, including all of Western’s feeder elementary and middle schools. The majority of the 178 failing schools listed in the report are located in urban areas that serve populations of students well below state averages in three significant categories. These averages are shown in Table 2, in addition to the averages reported by Western High School during the 2013-14 school year. These select student groups illustrate some of the most significant barriers to student success. Poverty, learning disabilities and language acquisition are obstacles not always factored into school ratings, yet are imperative for understanding why a school or district may struggle.

Table 2. *Comparison between New York State Averages and Western High School Averages (2013-14)*

	New York State	Western
Limited English Proficient	8%	27%
Students with Disabilities	16%	20%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	53%	83%
Graduation Rate	76%	30%

Source: Data.nysed.gov

The disparities between New York State’s averages and Western’s averages demonstrate that poor academic performance in public schools is caused by numerous factors. A school’s annual academic success rating could be predicted by measuring it against the state averages, especially in the categories of economic disadvantage, limited English proficiency and students with identified learning disabilities (see table 2). These factors have a significant impact on graduation rates and standardized test scores. The association between failing schools and these three categories cannot be understated (Aber et.al 8).

Consistent with the findings of Evans (2004), Duncan et al. (2010) and Berliner (2013), children from low socioeconomic-status families “generally achieve less academically than students from better-off families” (Cohen). As Sean Reardon points out, “The socioeconomic status of a child’s parents has always been one of the strongest predictors of the child’s academic achievement and educational attainment” (92). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds struggle with vocabulary and higher level academic concepts, often have stressful home lives, feel isolated, have less access to quality healthcare and live in communities that beget violence,

drug use and homelessness (Jensen). Students labeled economically disadvantaged are identified solely by their household's annual income, which if low enough, qualifies them for free or reduced priced breakfast and lunch at school ("Income Eligibility Guidelines"). Economically disadvantaged students rely on the school to provide two meals a day at free or reduced prices; a fact which becomes more pressing in the days leading up to extended school vacations. At Western, 83% of students are coping with issues of poverty, the highest consolidated percentage amongst all the high schools in the district (see table 3) and the outlying schools in the surrounding suburbs. The achievement gap, defined as the "disparity in academic performance between groups of students" from high and low-income families has never been more revealing as it is "roughly 30 to 40 percent larger among children born in 2001 than among those born twenty-five years earlier" (Reardon 90). As the economic gap grows each year in the United States, so does the academic achievement gap between the wealthiest and poorest students.

English Language Learners face additional issues in the classroom, as they are hastily responsible for meeting all graduation requirements, including high-stakes standardized testing. ELL students are "expected to master content in English before they have reached a certain level of English proficiency" (Van Roekel 3). Under NCLB, ELL students are allowed one year of classroom immersion until their scores are counted for AYP purposes, leaving schools with a heavy population of ELL students in danger of missing vital targets (Van Roekel 3). As the number of ELL students swells in the United States, one study estimates that by 2025, "one out of every four students will be an ELL" (The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition). Western High School, with a 27% ELL population in 2013-14, stands a full ten years ahead of the projected percentages of ELLs for public schools. No other high school in Western's district comes close to housing the percentage of ELL students (see table 3) enrolled

at Western. The majority of ELL students at Western are refugees, born and raised in Red Cross Aid camps, able to come to the United States through complex lottery systems. Many of them left nuclear family members behind, while others have witnessed violence that took the lives of loved ones. They write about these horrific events in broken English in their college essays, spend ten to twelve grueling hours taking New York State Regents exams with minimal modifications and attempt to assimilate into American culture, often translating for their family members (who have no formal English schooling) at various appointments and school meetings.

Finally, students with disabilities represent a fifth of Western's population. While this number is consistent with the rest of Western's district (see table 3), it is still higher than the state average. Students with identified learning disabilities face cognitive deficiencies, emotional and behavioral disorders and numerous challenges in the classroom, including the stigma of attending special classes or receiving services from teaching assistants during class periods (Ormrod 2). Students with disabilities are typically more susceptible to distractions, have difficulty with complex academic writing and deal with issues of low self-esteem (Ormrod 2). In the age of data collection, high-pressure testing and graduation requirements, students with disabilities are much more likely to slip through the cracks of low-performing schools, often becoming disillusioned and frustrated with their learning and the demands of their teachers and classes.

Table 3. *Vital Statistics for the Five High Schools in Western's District (2013-14)*

	Enrollment	Graduation Rate	Economically Disadvantaged Students	Limited English Proficient	Students with disabilities
Western	1321	30%	83%	27%	20%
Eastern	1264	55%	68%	17%	20%
Northern	1757	47%	69%	13%	19%
Southern	1422	65%	69%	7%	18%
Central	439	80%	64%	2%	18%

Source: Data.nysed.gov

Western students face multiple obstacles identified as severe impediments to academic success. Table 3 reveals the disparities between schools in the same district, with Western distinguished as the only high school to require irrevocable intervention from NYSED. Central High School, which opened in a brand new building in 2008, offered the first high school choice option for students in Western's district willing to apply and interview for a seat in the new school. It was widely considered that the critical drop in Western's graduation rates since 2008 (see table 1) was a direct result of Central's opening, giving students who would have eventually graduated from Western the option to attend a smaller school with an untarnished reputation.

Since 2008, Western's graduation rate has plummeted, while the percentage of English Language Learners and Economically Disadvantaged students rose significantly. Central High School has been lauded for its high graduation rate and small class sizes, while comparatively, Western was labeled, disgraced and finally abandoned by the New York State Education Department without ever truly addressing the root issues plaguing the school and its community.

It was inaccurately assumed that Western's community issues played no role in its perpetual failure and that teachers and students were solely responsible for the school's dreadful failure.

The Language of Failing Schools

"We're not going to allow another generation of children to be failed by a failing bureaucracy, especially when, in this state, we spend more money than any other state to educate a child, period. There is no excuse for failure."

(Gov. Andrew Cuomo qtd. in Blain 1)

On television, in print, and websites across the state and country, the American public is inundated with facts and figures about failing schools (Kumashiro 19). Politicians, parents, pro-charter school organizations, international testing companies, large corporate stakeholders and educational theorists have asserted scathing anecdotes about the experiences of students within failing public schools and punitive solutions for fixing them (Kumashiro 33). The system is woefully outdated, teachers greedily devour their excessive entitlements and students who could not care less about their educations are left to fend for themselves in decaying buildings with adults who have purposely failed them for years (Ravitch 10). As a result, students are seemingly "trapped" in persistently failing schools. New York's school system is depicted as "broken" with no real plan to "fix it." Educational opportunities have repeatedly been "stolen" from our students (Kittredge 1). In Brooklyn, 9200 students are "stuck" in failing schools because the system is in "crisis" and "makes change nearly impossible" (Fermino 2). America's students are "stuck in a ditch," taught by professionals recruited "mostly from the middle and bottom of their college classes" (Klein 3). Failing schools are the result of "weak teachers" who "enjoy the immunity" provided by "powerful" unions that have essentially ruined the promise of public education (Thomas 1). Public schools are "prisons," "damaging" our nation's future by "failing

our children and our society” (Gray 2). Governor Cuomo has called low-performing Buffalo City Schools a “disgrace” and wonders why “anybody still lives in the City of Buffalo and would send their kid to a public school” (qtd. in Tan 2). The school “crisis” is “dire,” “dismal,” and “threatening.” Parents are “starved of high quality options for their children” who are “forced to attend” schools that are failing them (“Ignition Failure” 1). Too many classrooms are “wasting huge amounts of time” (Payne 90) and “everybody is working below capacity” (Payne 91). The threatening language of modern education reform has replaced meaningful conversation and problem solving with denigration and public shaming.

As a result, public school students have become enemies of the state, harbored within a system that requires obliteration without even a whisper of consent from the major players involved. Student input is severely lacking in the decision-making process about how to improve failing schools as they are often viewed as obstacles, unwilling to recognize what is best for them. Dana Mitra, assistant professor of educational theory and policy at Penn State, has done extensive research on student voice and its impact on school reform.

Partnering with students to identify school problems and possible solutions reminds teachers and administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate. Students can raise tough issues that administrators and teachers might not highlight—including examining structural and cultural injustices within schools rather than blaming failing students for not succeeding in schools (qtd. in Savrock 4).

Students who attend failing schools are too often blamed instead of assisted, scorned instead of understood and distinguished as a major part of the educational problem, not the solution (Savrock 1). At most schools closing due to low academic performance, student failure

prematurely silences student voices. The students at Western High School were merely notified of the school's closing and never consulted for any role in the decision making process.

Unfortunately for teachers, their collective voices are silenced by a growing trend of animosity directed from the general public. Many teachers, who attempt to voice their collective positions on school issues, are considered to have adopted a "selfish attitude that has put the demands of adults above the needs of students" (Kevin Cotter qtd. in Lewis and Livengood 2). Teachers in general have been the beneficiaries of America's current "moral panic," which according to Dana Goldstein, occurs when "'policymakers and the media focus on a single class of people ... as emblems of a large, complex social problem'" (Berlatsky 6). Teachers, especially those employed in failing schools, are "demonized" by their perceived role in the failing school and are often "disciplined when they go wrong and fail to meet standards" (Kumashiro 33). Moral panics function to "create identities" that need heavy regulation and control (Berlatsky 6). In this case, unionized, public school teachers, determined to ruin the lives of their students, have become the greatest threat to America's future prosperity. If teachers are the "large, complex social problem" within education, "then you can solve the problem of education with ever more vigorous control, and ever more constant evaluation of teachers" (Berlatsky 2).

The alarmist language of failing schools has resulted in an unprecedented paradigm of accountability, testing, scapegoating and public defamation of students and teachers housed in low performing schools. This bitter narrative is biased enough to influence any casual spectator into believing that failing schools could not possibly feature any quality other than chaos. The American public is inundated with the narratives of everyone except the primary sources: the students who will have no school to return to for Homecoming, the teachers who are demoralized

and threatened by faceless departments, and the communities that no longer have an edifice to call their own. If “history is written by the victors” as attributed to Winston Churchill, then the perpetual losers in a rigged game deserve to be heard.

The following narratives were collected from those who walked the halls, ate the lunches and worked in the classrooms of one of the lowest-performing high schools in New York State. Their stories reveal what test scores, collected data and percentages never could. These teachers and students were assigned the task of personifying Western High School as they experienced it in an effort to demonstrate what failing schools have to offer and what could never be reflected in a percentage or a chart or a report.

Chapter III

A Dysfunctional Family

Over the next fifteen years, I made many more radio documentaries, working to shine a light on people who were rarely heard from in the media. Over and over again, I'd see how the simple act of being interviewed could mean so much to people, particularly those who were told that their stories didn't matter. I could literally see peoples' backs straighten as they started to speak into the microphone.

-Dave Isay, "What Happens When People are Given a Voice?"

Introduction

In the early fall of 2014, a 12th grade student at Western High School approached me and asked if I would write him a letter of recommendation to fulfill his college application requirements. After agreeing, he inquired about two other teachers' whereabouts as classroom changes at Western were an annual undertaking. I informed him that these teachers, who he had studied with years prior, had left the school after the announcement of its impending closing. His initial response was of mild discontent, yet after a few minutes of discussion, he realized that these teachers would play no part in his senior year or beyond. In that moment, this student understood that an essential portion of his high school experience was missing. He had lost some of the adults that had helped him along the way and was unsure how to reach out to them with a commonplace request. He asked about coming back to visit Western as a college freshman (a veritable rite of passage for the students we graduate) and whether or not the school or any remaining teachers would still be there.

This conversation bore the fruit of this project that has turned into a celebration of the collective anguish shared by teachers and students who felt betrayed and silenced by the hasty pilfering of an essential community institution. They did not know who to blame, and much of the fall semester of 2014 was spent adjusting to the awkward system of two schools housed in one building. Small plastic gates fabricated the separation between Western High School and its solution, while two principals encouraged students to get to class while two bell schedules muddled the halls even further. My students could not hide their disdain and often we would break off from daily lessons to discuss the circumstances of Western's closing and what it meant for the authenticity of their high school experience. While our discussions sparked rebellious sentiment, we knew deep inside that not much could be done to make the current situation feel genuine again.

When I approached a handful of former students with the idea of capturing narratives about Western High School, they leapt at the opportunity. They too felt a growing sense of suppression; even as adult graduates of Western, their stories remained silenced. As we began the interviews, much like Dave Isay, I witnessed their backs stiffening and their indebtedness to Western becoming noticeably clearer through voices that otherwise were ignored. These students offer the truth like no other stakeholders could. Their experiences inside a low-performing school defy the damaging percentages that have closed numerous urban public institutions across the country, erroneously branding students, teachers and communities as hazardous and unable to mind themselves.

This chapter addresses student narratives singularly, giving each Western graduate his/her own opportunity to simply inform. While similar themes emerge throughout the

narratives, the individual student is allowed to the relay story as s/he experienced it, with as little interference from the author as possible.

Daniel Donovan

Daniel Donovan is a 2009 graduate of Western High School. He recently returned to the district after securing a middle school teaching position, his professional goal that his teachers espoused since he was a freshman. Daniel describes himself as a “white male of average intelligence, who grew up in the inner city with barely above poverty level income, decent resources, a decent friend group” and by all accounts, “attended a poor school.” Daniel was extremely candid during our conversation. He was relaxed, poised, and seemed as if he had been prepared to tell this story ever since he graduated from Western. When I asked him about a memorable high school experience to launch the interview, he returned to his very first day as a fourteen year old freshman:

I had no idea what was going on, I had no clue. I knew I was afraid for my life. I remember thinking, Jesus Christ, I’m at Western of all places, you hear so much about it. Coming from Middle School, I wasn’t sure what to expect. My first class was music with Mr. Rose. Little did we know, it was his first class, ever! He made it very relaxed, down to earth, to our level. He treated us like real people from the first second I walked in to the last second I walked out. I was very impressed. It was a very welcoming place. You read about all these kids going to school, not knowing anybody, being terribly nervous. You know, I never felt that way once I got inside the school.

Daniel’s story introduces two integral themes that repeat themselves throughout the collected narratives: fear of the unknown Western High School and comfort with the reality of

Western High School. His explanation of the way his attitude changed almost the moment he entered the building is not an isolated incident. On the contrary, it's almost a seamless phenomenon from the judgment of outside visitors, who anticipate the worst about Western based on hearsay, only to have their perspectives altered at the true nature of the school after having spent a reasonable amount of time within its grasp.

Daniel corroborated this sentiment, stating, "...it seemed like when you walked into Western, it had a defining sort of, vibe. You weren't just anywhere, you were at WHS. I felt welcomed immediately." I asked Daniel to elaborate on this vibe that he felt and he continued:

There's like a heartbeat at Western. I mean you never felt like, in four years and even the two years I visited after, I never felt like something good wasn't happening at Western. I guess I was someone who always saw the good in the school. And I tried to be the good in the school, most of the time, but I always felt like there was more to Western than met the eye. Everybody at Western was in a shitty situation, and for better or for worse we were in it together. There was not a lot of room for the petty crap that bogs people down from the ages of 14 to 18, there was just no room for it. By the end of my time there it was to the point where we had lost like three-quarters of the class from when we were freshmen, and I was in the same classes with people I had been with for four years. I worked a part time job, if I had to go, I would just go, and that probably shouldn't have been ok but it was. I remember Western very positively because when I walked in, I felt like I was home. For many years. Initially it might not have felt like that, but after four years, you had to pry me off the commencement stage. It just felt like something existed there, I don't know what it is, I couldn't figure it out then and I still can't now. And I have not felt that way since.

Daniel's diligence about his feelings towards Western resonated throughout the interview. He has often claimed that his graduation from Western not only provided him with the academic prowess to succeed, but also the survival skills, as he watched many of his classmates drop quietly out of school.

Daniel's 9th grade cohort that entered Western High School in the fall of 2005 numbered 359 students (The New York State School Report Card). By the time he was a senior, only 170 students remained from his original 9th grade cohort. Daniel's graduating class of 2009 included 147 students out of the 170 that began their senior year. Daniel's assertion that three quarters of the students that he started school with who did not finish is no exaggeration. On the contrary, 59% of the students who were enrolled as freshmen and walked into Western with Daniel's same sense of the unknown never walked out as graduates. The majority of them left between their sophomore and junior years. Daniel personified this overwhelming percentage of disappearance in the case of his friend, Yadier Quinteros:

Nobody had a perfect life. Success for us was almost defiant, in many ways. There were so many pitfalls along the way that we probably shouldn't have made it, and I think about often, especially with the work I do now, about all the breaks I got, and how if... Yadier Quinteros comes to mind, I mean this dude was really good friends with us, me Kevin, David, George and all of them. He was really good friends with us for the first two years of school, well the first year and a half, when he got kicked out of AP World History because he just didn't do the work, he started using marijuana and he kind of fell off the face of the earth and we never really spoke to him again. I saw somebody who was at Western who moved to New York City after graduation. She's back in town and we had lunch yesterday, she asked me what happened to him; it's a shame I had no idea. That kid

was smart. That was a good kid. He had some things wrong in his life and at the end of the day he didn't have the skills that I had to cope with it. To cope with all the things that were wrong. To cope with all the set forth stereotypes, more or less, because we weren't supposed to succeed, we weren't, but we did, some of us did, most of us did. It could've gone that way for any of us.

This idea of success as "defiant" was something that Daniel and I returned to many times throughout the interview. The indication that Western students were not supposed to succeed was something I encountered in numerous conversations with people outside of the school's walls. When I purported the accomplishments of the school to friends or other teaching professionals, statistics and nominal anecdotes were thrown back at me as proof that I was fantasizing about the merits of the Western community. Daniel corroborated this with his own experiences working in a grocery store a few miles outside of his city neighborhood in close proximity to Western High School:

When I used to tell people I went to Western, they would be like, wow, are you ok? Are you sure? Even today, depending on who I'm talking to, I'll throw it around like cultural capital, I'll be like, oh hey, guess where I went to high school. It's funny because personally speaking I feel like I've ascended to the middle class, but every time I walk into Western, I'm transported in a time capsule. People still think that it's broken, I mean it's closing, right, it's a broken school. I owe everything to it. I don't think that I would be able to interact with anybody the same way. I mean part of my life for maybe ten years now, has been explaining to people that it's not that bad, and learning how to paint something positively because you have to deal with it all the time. I would always have to do better than what I was expected to do. Western's always getting dragged through the

mud for something: someone's getting stabbed, someone got in a fight, more babies were popping out, graduation rate is 28%, all of those things. The moment you say you went to Western, you automatically have a hill to climb up. Yes, I go to the worst school in the world and I'm proud of that.

Western's New York State Regents scores and graduation rates never did the school any favors. Many students felt that they were constantly advocating for the school's merits and that it was never as bad as it was portrayed in the media or in the minds of those who had no connection to the school. Upon close examination of the school's facilities, resources and general appearance, Daniel was able to make some grave connections between what the school looked like and how it was received by the general public. He said:

When I first walked in, sewage was backed up in the cafeteria. It didn't look much like a school, it was this decrepit brick building, no windows, terrible fluorescent lighting that flickered for days on end, like you were in a mental institution. I remember how Western smelled. I'll never forget that. I played tennis for a year, but not on our cracked courts. We had a pool with no swim team. Where I went to college, I mean it was beautiful. It's got this gorgeous campus, beautiful school buildings, classrooms with brand new desks, clean, brand new dining hall. They were always working on something, improving its look. There was an expectation that because you went there, you deserved this. You could say conversely that this is the same thing at Western. No windows, dirty floors, old lockers. The message was that if you go to Western, you deserved this.

Daniel's evaluation of Western's physical shortcomings fell directly in line with the images that most people create when they think of a failing school. Crumbling or non-existent facilities perpetuate the notion that Western students created this environment; thus, they deserve

to wallow in its misery. I pressed Daniel about his willingness to stay at the school even though he recognized that he could have it much better elsewhere. He said:

We were like one, giant, ridiculous, dysfunctional family across the board. I thought about transferring across town as a senior. I was going to take 10 AP classes and get into Harvard. But one of my teachers heard the news, and he grabbed me in the hallway. He said, “What are you thinking? You fit here.” That’s something I tell everyone. At Western, you had a place at the table. Not in an extraordinarily good or bad way, but everyone had a place. But I also give them the facts: no windows, backed up sewage pushing our lunches into the gym for months at a time. It wasn’t the greatest place in the world and I never pretended that it was. I learned to make the best of a bad situation. I learned that I could succeed despite whatever was in front of me. Did I miss out? Probably. I felt like that was part of the experience. It was so terrible sometimes, that you were learning from how terrible it was.

Daniel was adamant about the various ways that Western provided him with a complete learning experience. Even though he felt that the physical aesthetics of the building were severely lacking when compared to other high schools he frequented, it was the community of students and teachers that made learning a holistic and beneficial experience. I asked Daniel about some of the people who impacted him within the school and he discussed many of his teachers and counselors. He said:

Anytime I remember a positive experience, it was because I struggled. I was pushed to do something better. I had great teachers all four years. It was a rotating cast of characters, a terrific ensemble of eclectic personalities. Every part of my day was different and every class I had was different. The personalities of the teachers always came out really

strongly, because you had to share yourself with the students, you had to, otherwise you weren't getting through to them. Teachers were human beings and I remember that very strongly. You're not going to find that anywhere else. It took me three years to learn that my advisor in college had kids that were my age and going to school. And that he was married, even. He didn't wear his ring. He didn't want to share anything with us. Even though I took four classes with him, I had him every year, it took me until the 4th year to figure that out.

The teachers at Western appear to identify themselves first as individuals and second as teachers in order to reach students on a personal level. The diverse personalities of the teachers and their willingness to assist students became a landmark of the school. The teachers who worked at Western that have moved on to other schools or districts tend to identify themselves first as Western teachers.

I concluded the interview with Daniel by asking him for his opinion about the school's impending closing. It was something that we had been building to, and it took the process of the interview for him to really come to grips with the decision made for us, the students and employees of the school. I have had my own difficulties identifying all of the consequences once the school is no longer officially Western. Daniel said:

When Western closes, I can't look back and say, that's my high school. You talk to people who went to the other schools and they remember them fondly, and they still exist. Things are different, of course, but still, that's their school. Mine won't exist. In ten years it's not going to matter anymore because things will still be the same. There's always going to be students and teachers that stand out, there will always be kids whose faces I can remember, but not their names, kids that we lost. People that we lost. School

was not going to fix their lives. You couldn't put a band aid on their lives by sending them to high school. They are wiping out everything that was good about Western, and replacing it. To just wipe it out completely and change everything, you aren't addressing the core issues. Bad as it was, that was still home. And that's gone. And I feel like it's closing a book on an entire chapter of lives in the city. All of us that went through that have a shared, common experience. It's like an imagined community, almost. It's almost there. Western was its own city within the city. Everyone at Western knew that we went through this together. Now, it's gone.

Kayla Dennings

Kayla Dennings is a 2014 graduate of Western High School. She describes herself as someone who “speaks her mind a lot.” I asked Kayla to explain a memorable experience at Western High School and she said, “I had a lot of those. I loved being an athlete, I loved playing sports there. As far as athletics, it was a struggle, because it's hard losing all the time. I always wanted to win a title, like sectionals, but we never did. It's Western, I guess.” I asked Kayla to elaborate on the idea that “It's Western” and she replied, “Western's reputation is just known as losing all the time. I don't think a lot of people there have heart. When you walk into our gym, there's nothing on the banners. Only soccer. Other than that, we haven't won anything since like 1985.”

Immediately, Kayla's attention turned to the opinions of others in regards to Western. She concurred Daniel's ideas about the *us versus them* mentality, citing a number of moments where people “expected us to be failures.” Kayla's graduating class of 2014 gained a unique perspective in regards to Western's closing as it was announced on the news just two months

before their graduation. Kayla and many of her classmates had attended a feeder middle school close to Western that had also closed during the spring of their eighth grade year. Even though she had lived with the stigma of failure for multiple years, the closing of Western seemed to have a greater impact on her experience. She explained:

When they were talking about Western on the news, everybody was whispering about it... you guys are going to fail, you guys are nothing. When you go to other schools and play other teams, they're like, "Oh, it's just Western, this will be an easy win." We are just hood kids going to school not really getting an education. In reality, we did get an education. I graduated, I'm going to college, I'm going to make something of myself. They think all of Western kids have bad habits, don't go to class, don't care. There are kids like that in every high school. They look down on us, they shut it down so much, talking about our bad test scores. Our low test scores, our low graduation rate, they say more about us than we ever could.

Kayla's account of the overwhelming negativity personifying the school resonates through all of the experiences in this project. The expectation of failure was something that pushed her to work harder, to "prove that we were all capable of becoming something great." She believed in the students at the school and I asked her to describe Western to someone who had never been there. She said:

It's very diverse. Some students are very cool, relaxed...I would describe it based on the people I was around, like my senior class was so outgoing, so ready to do something. We were always doing stuff, we always went out to eat as a class, we were always there for each other, just a lot of fun. We were always one. There were never any problems between anyone. I really liked that. We were one, together, unified. I think that's how

city kids are able to survive. I think Western really brought that out in us, whether intentional or not.

I asked Kayla to give me a definition of a “city kid.” I too attended and graduated from a city high school in the same district as Western’s and I was always intrigued with the differences between the kids I went to school with and those who I knew from the adjoining suburban and even rural communities. Kayla said:

City kids are kids who act on their own. They say what they have to say, they speak their minds. If we want to succeed, we do, if we want to do drugs, there’s no one really guiding us, we have to do it ourselves. That’s just how it is. The suburban schools, they are different. They don’t cuss, we are all just taught differently. I was always taught that if someone hits me, I hit them back. I don’t let anyone push me over or bully me. If I went to a suburban school, I’d get in trouble for cussing. At a city school, you don’t get in trouble for that, everyone is doing it. It would be like getting in trouble for eating lunch or going to the bathroom. City kids are mainly black, or mixed or from another country. You rarely see a lot of white kids at our school. Even though we think segregation is gone, you can see it plain as day at our school.

I pointed out to Kayla that she did in fact graduate with a number of white students. She vehemently denied this fact, claiming that:

They were ghetto! It’s different! A Western white kid is black. They say things as black, they act black, they are just black. We don’t look at them as white. You’re black to us because you say everything we say, you do everything we do. There’s brotherhood, sisterhood, color is like, meaningless. A white kid from a suburban school wouldn’t last a day in a city school.

Kayla was building to an extremely significant point about one of the unsung benefits of attending a school that was racially and ethnically diverse, yet unified through its perceived inferiority and failure. Kayla asserted that race, at least to her and many of her classmates, had nothing to do with color, but everything to do with solidarity through their situation. Western students did not appear to identify each other by their race, but by their collective experiences, which typically were not always positive, at least from the perspectives of others outside of the school community. Kayla was able to frame this using a post-Western experience, specifically speaking about her freshman roommate in college. She said:

My roommate, she was afraid of me because I was black. I knew it. She wouldn't talk to me or anything. I'm trying to get to know her and she was like, hesitant. Now she's like my best friend. Since we grew tight, she told me all this. She said she was afraid because I was black. She didn't go to school with any black kids, she literally didn't know any before she got to college. College was the first time she heard a different language or really saw and spoke with non-white people. I was so interested in that. I had no idea that really existed. Me? I had already experienced so much going into college. I can say that I already had that experience as a city kid. It was nothing new to me. I'm diverse myself, I'm outgoing, I love to talk. I always talked to kids from other places. Western's diversity made it easy to talk to people. Shouldn't I have been more afraid of some white kid from the country? Aren't they supposed to not like black people? But I was not scared. Kids who grow up outside of the city don't know what to do in these settings, they have no other experiences to fall back on. They respond based on what they think they know, not what is actual reality.

Kayla attributes her ability to get along with all types of people to her experiences at Western. She rationalizes one of the unmeasured qualities of Western, claiming that her “experiences at Western, a place that’s supposedly so dangerous and scary, have made me a friendlier, more outgoing and accepting person.” This sentiment is not isolated; on the contrary, this attitude replicates itself throughout the narratives of students that I interviewed. I believe that Daniel and Kayla may have considered diversity in thought and appearance as a universal characteristic of all academic institutions, especially since Western’s diversity was never contrived and the school lacked a dominant racial group. It was not until they attended their respective colleges that they began to realize how Western’s uniqueness had benefitted their total experience as students and people.

Like Daniel, Kayla also relayed her experiences with the teachers at Western. One of the stipulations with Western’s phase out was that the teachers in the school would be moved elsewhere. While the teaching staff and administration at the school were searching for answers about the future, the students were as well. Kayla explained that Western teachers were unique because “they all had different ways for caring about students.” She mentioned one teacher in particular, Mr. Martin, who was “that father figure” who always told her she could do better and “expected more” from her. Kayla continued, saying that she “found herself doing better first for him, then for myself.” She continued, citing at least a dozen teachers, who had adjusted to what it took to actually teach successfully in an urban, high-needs high school. They were “always there” for her, “even in the middle of class.” She also added that many of these teachers still kept in contact with her, and a few had attended a local athletic event that she was participating in.

After the phasing out of Western was announced, Kayla said she remembered asking, “Where will the teachers go? When Western phases out, will there still be Western teachers in

the new school? I was really concerned and I care. I want you to be able to teach where you love to teach, not get pushed around.” I asked her to clarify how she knew Western teachers wanted to teach at the school. She said:

You all would have left long ago if you didn’t want to be there. The teachers come to school every day, they have a smile on their face every day, they care. If you are prepared every day, paying attention to the kids, ready to teach, you love your job. They never seem to have a bad day, they always seem on and ready to help us. They don’t complain about the kids, they complain about having to leave the school. No teachers wanted to go once the school was closed, some got pushed out and some just couldn’t deal with it anymore. They didn’t want the change at all, I know that. It’s like home. Western was like a home for me, for them too.

Kayla’s perspective is unique because the tail end of her high school experience ended with a vagueness bordering on indifference. She left the school unsure of which teachers would still be in the building, or if her former coaches would still be directing her former athletic teams. Kayla ended the interview by explaining the warmth of Western and how it appealed to her and so many others on a nightly basis. She said:

When I wanted to get away from my house, I could always go to Western. There was always some event going on, something to do. I played sports so I was generally always there. There were people there that I truly cared about, that I truly loved. I knew I could go there and be relaxed, see my friends and teachers. Some students caught the bus really late, so there were kids in the building until six or seven at night. I could go anytime. So it was like a second home to me. I was safe at Western.

Both Kayla and Daniel described Western as a *home*, a sentiment that is not unique to the students and teachers that worked and learned in the school. She also highlighted the merits and shortcomings of Western and likened her growth as an individual to the overwhelming diversity of the school.

Mahima Shanti

Mahima Shanti is a 2014 graduate of Western High School. She is a refugee from a Southeast Asian nation who has lived in America for almost five years. Mahima and I planned to meet at a library near her home while she was on break from her first semester of college. Her neighborhood has recently become a magnet for relocating families and she was busy setting up for a talk she was giving to other students about the transition from high school to college. Mahima is an extremely warm person; she was always smiling in school and became one of those rare kids that other students were naturally drawn to. I asked Mahima to explain a memorable experience that she had at Western, and she began her story on her first day, much like Daniel had previously done.

It was my first day in school. I didn't have a schedule or anything, I mean I did, I just didn't know where to pick it up. I was following a friend of mine and I walked into my ESL (English as a Second Language) class and the way I felt in the class, I had never felt it before. It was my first day of high school in the United States, and but it didn't *feel* that way. Ms. Killian, the teacher, the way she was talking to me, it was very welcoming and I didn't feel any different.

I asked Mahima to elaborate on Ms. Killian. They spent the next few years together in various ESL classes and I was interested in their relationship.

Ms. Killian has been an ESL teacher at Western for a while. She was a person who could look at you and not make you feel like you didn't know anything. She would talk with you in a way you would talk with anyone else. With others, they always seemed like they were giving me extra precautions, maybe for my own good? But with her, it was just like, "relax, I'm here for you."

Mahima continued speaking about Ms. Killian and also included a few more of her Western teachers. She used the word "love" when describing her feelings for her teachers. She said:

I had no idea what schools were like in the United States. But my teachers, they cared immediately. They were like my second parents. Sometimes, like at the schools in my refugee camp, there were certain unseen rules about what you could talk with your teachers about and what you couldn't. I could talk to my teachers at Western about anything. If I had a relationship problem, or like if I had a family problem, or if I needed help, they were always there for me. It worked perfectly. That's what built up my feelings of love, because I think they loved me back.

I asked Mahima to elaborate more on the differences and similarities between her school experiences in a refugee camp and at Western. While she noted the high level of knowledge of teachers in both schools, she explained that the relationships with her teachers in her previous schools were solely academic. She said, "I was not able to speak casually to my teachers back then. It was really strict; you could get beaten for being late or not having your homework. The closeness was not there. But here, I could just go and talk to them."

The connection with teachers and students was something that Daniel and Kayla also mentioned, but for Mahima, this idea of teachers as *people* initially seemed perplexing to her.

She explained that many of her friends were extremely shy when they first came to Western, but most of them were able to move past their caution once they realized that the teachers were distinct from their previous experiences. I asked Mahima to explain how her teachers were different and she said, “I could ask for help with my college applications or essays or applying for scholarships. My teachers were always there for me. I never heard a teacher say, ‘I don’t have time for you.’ If you asked for help, you always got help.” While regular assistance from a teacher may not seem luxurious to a student who is used to it, Mahima made it clear that her teachers’ willingness to assist her led to much of her success. She said, “I never thought I’d do so well in high school, or that I’d ever attend college. I feel like my teachers deserve most of the credit. We all put in the hours, but without them I wouldn’t be here; not even close.”

In addition to her school experiences prior to attending Western, I also asked Mahima about life after Western and how she would compare the two. She said:

I miss the teachers, a lot. I like my professors, but they are not as approachable as my high school teachers. It’s difficult to talk with them, you need to make a good impression on them and try not to say the wrong thing. You’re under so much pressure that you can’t talk a lot. That’s what I miss. In high school, I could go to my teachers and be casual, talk about my day and then talk about what I needed, if I needed help with a lab or something. But in college I just get to the point. I feel like I can’t build that connection, I don’t love my professors. I love my high school teachers. I like my professors. They are really nice, but I just can’t connect to them like I could my high school teachers. I don’t go to my professors or my advisor with anything more than school questions, there’s no real comfort there.

Mahima's point about comfort was an idea that she returned to a number of times during our discussion. While comfort among her teachers was essential to her success, Mahima also spoke about her comfort level among her classmates. Western, a place of failure, of perceived violence and deprivation, a school so wrought with negativity that it was closed by the New York State Education Department, provided Mahima the environment to completely be herself. Western's high population of English Language Learners was stereotypically viewed as an impediment to the school's success. For Mahima, it turned out to be a blessing. Speaking about Western, she said:

For a student who had just come to the United States, there were a lot of people like me. It helped me adjust to everything; you could see a lot of people were just like you. They had struggled, they had come from different countries. I saw that and it helped me realize that I could make it, I could do it. We gave each other strength that way. If it was just me, I think I would have had a heart attack. I had friends from Somalia, from Burma, Nepal, West Africa...even the American students, they were from different racial backgrounds or their parents were from other places. It was great. There were hundreds of students like me. I really miss that in college, I wish there was more diversity. I am closer with the international students in college, not so much the American students. They tend to make a bigger deal of *what* I am, not really *who* I am. It's okay, I don't mind, just don't make it too big of a deal that I feel like an alien. The international students hear my story and they connect with it, they share a similar story and then we're done with it. The American students make a bigger deal out of it. I almost don't want to share my story with them.

I asked Mahima to illustrate feeling like an "alien" outside of Western High School and the community she had lived in before attending college. She said:

It's about understanding. They don't know where I'm coming from, and if I say I'm from a refugee camp, they'll make a huge deal about it. In high school, I mean especially at Western, I never felt that way, like, I'm a human being too. In college, I said I had come from a refugee camp and everyone made a huge deal about it. I told a friend about it and she interviewed me for a class she was taking, and I was okay with it. Suddenly I was all over my college's website this fall. I just felt like, am I not a human being right now? I am just a refugee? I don't want to be identified as someone different. Don't make me into, I don't know. It's not like I just want to fit in, I want all of you to know my story, it doesn't mean I'm someone else. I am an immigrant, I am here to fit in and be a citizen sometime in the future, just don't make me feel different.

Mahima's discomfort at the lack of diversity is something that many Western students have shared in the past. Almost a quarter of the students at Western are non-native English speaking students, making the programs and teachers available well-versed in what it takes to assist international students who are almost exclusively from refugee camps. It also creates an atmosphere of equality among the student body as Mahima explained, "We were so diverse, who was going to bully who?"

Mahima's first semester in college was essentially the first time she had been isolated from her peers who shared similar stories of discontent. She said, "Western was somewhere you felt welcomed, especially if you were an immigrant. Everyone knew. Everyone there kind of understood, even if you didn't share your story. The teachers, the students, they get where you're coming from. You don't need to explain it all." From a teacher's standpoint, I can corroborate this explanation. From athletics, to school plays, to the morning announcements, every student

“belonged.” As Mahima explained, “Western wasn’t judgment free, but there was 99% less judgment there than anywhere else I’ve been.”

At the close of the interview, I asked Mahima to explain her overall impressions of her experiences at Western, taking into account her current position as a college freshman. I was interested in the comparisons she had been making throughout our conversation. She said:

When I speak to people in college, they automatically know I’m not from here.

Sometimes when people hear your accent, they prefer not to talk with you, they might not understand or they might not want to understand. At Western, people got used to it. My teachers, the students, they know where I’m from, without really knowing, so I don’t have to be worried about being judged. That’s a great feeling. I wish I had that in college.

I think that boosted my confidence, which helped me do really good in high school. I always felt like the teachers understood what I was talking about, or at least they tried to understand. In college, there’s more students, teachers may not always have the time. But still, it’s really hard to explain yourself to everyone. I don’t want to talk about living in a refugee camp ten times a day. I don’t want to do that. Everyone already understood that in high school. I didn’t need to keep repeating myself; it was like, not an issue. When I say I lived in a refugee camp, the response is “oh wow, what was that like?” It is very different for me now in college. At Western, the stories had already been shared, everyone already knew what it was like, in a way, and we could just move on. I miss that connection, that bond with everyone. We had suffered, but now we were fine. And that’s what I miss about high school, and why I hate to hear bad things being said about it.

Come to Western for a few weeks, then tell me what it’s really like.

Travis Mason

Travis Mason is a 2015 graduate of Western High School. He describes himself as “your basic jock. You know, just playing sports, friends with everyone and doing good enough in class.” I caught up with Travis a few weeks after graduation. He seemed excited to speak about Western, but he also seemed a little beyond the school, ready for the next level. I knew he would provide some essential information about his experiences at the school, but I was also interested in understanding the experiences of a football player who never had the opportunity to play a home game.

I asked Travis to illustrate a memorable moment involving Western, and he began the interview by explaining his 8th grade graduation assembly where he sat casually with his friends “dreaming about high school.” He said, “We were in the auditorium, congratulating each other, hitting each other with our rolled up diplomas, not really listening. The principal stood up and told us that 75% of the kids in the auditorium wouldn’t graduate high school.” While this statement did not seem entirely appropriate at a middle school graduation, Travis admitted, “it made me think that I wasn’t going to make it. It was actually one of the best things an adult could have told me at that age.” I asked Travis if that percentage was accurate and he said, “Since I began as a freshman, I know a ton of kids who weren’t at graduation a few weeks ago. I mean a ton. They’re in jail, they moved, or no one knows what happened to them.”

Travis told me that his middle school (the same middle school Kayla had attended) had been shut down “maybe a year or two after I left. That’s two schools I’ve closed, yet I graduated from both. I don’t get it.” I asked him how Western’s closing affected him and he said:

I don’t like it closing. I always wanted to come back to visit my old teachers, they knew how it was and how I was. I used to be a bad student, now I’m good and going to college

in a few months. I want to share that with them. I was probably one of those kids that they thought wouldn't graduate and I want to come back and show them how good I'm doing. Graduate high school, go to college, maybe that motivates teachers, or other students, when we come back and we show them that anyone can do it. Now we can't come back. The teachers, the coaches that I played for, they won't be here anymore, so there's no point in coming back. It's not going to be the same.

Travis was adamant that he had nothing to return to. While the statistics are not readily available, the number of teachers who have left Western over the past three years is staggering. As previously stated, the majority of the teachers who did leave felt that they had no other choice because eventually the state would force them out under the *Phase Out* regulations. I have only connected with the class of 2015 graduates through email and social media. Almost none have returned to the building. Travis told me that "thirty years from now, no one will even know that Western existed."

Travis's school identity was centered around athletics, particularly football. I asked him to describe playing sports at Western and he explained his significant role as a leader, "dealing with the underclassmen and building a real connection. Even though we lost most of the time, we lost together." He continued, saying:

I wouldn't want to play for any other team besides Western. The only thing is, it was kind of tough not having a field. Like, we couldn't practice field goals with no field goal posts. We didn't have the proper equipment like the other schools have, that gives them an advantage. They shut down baseball, we had to combine with other schools in the city, first with Southern, now there's just one city team. It's like you don't have pride for your

school, you're not playing for your school. You're playing for a side of town or the entire city. Our baseball uniforms never said *Western*.

Travis was heating up and sharing more of the moments that had a greater effect on him than he may have realized. I know the players talked about these things loosely in school, but looking back, he was irritated and spoke like something essential had been taken from him. Travis continued, comparing his experience with what he saw at other schools. He said, "We didn't play for school pride. We played just to play. If we had a field and we had our own little crowd, more people would come to our games, it would be easier for our families and friends to show up, so we'd have more support. There would be more of a reason to play, more drive. You go to these other fields, you're in their locker rooms..." As he trailed off, I encouraged him to continue. This was opening up a host of other issues that he felt but maybe never expressed as a student at Western. Not having field goal posts may seem arbitrary, but I cannot ever recall a time when Western even attempted a field goal or an extra point in any of the football games I attended. During Travis' four years playing varsity football, the team won four games and lost thirty. Travis continued, saying:

Most schools, okay, every school, had homecoming at their own fields. All of our home games were played at other schools. We never once had those moments in front of our own fans on our own field. I think we would have done better with a home field. When you are doing it for your teammates it gives you a drive, but when you're doing it for your school...when your teachers and principal are there, you do better. You do things differently because you know people are watching you and you don't want to let them down at a home game. And plus, we had to travel for every game. We would get ready in our locker room, get all pumped up, and then get on a bus. It would take all of the

excitement out of it. We never got to have those moments in front of our fans on our field. That alone ruined our high school days. That real high school experience, for the players, the fans, our parents, we didn't really get that.

While the city that Western resides in is divided into four quadrants that dictate which high school students will eventually end up attending, students can advocate for themselves to attend the school of their choice, either by petition to the district or by applying to special programming that a particular school may offer. I asked Travis if Western's field situation influenced student-athletes to attend other schools and he said:

People don't want to come here [Western]. I know a few kids that live near me who went to Southern or Northern and did well. They wanted to be successful, maybe play at the next level. Those other schools, their fields have been done for a long time. Even the one we had years ago was terrible. We played our modified games there on Saturday mornings. Uneven grass, muddy, the bleachers were old, some parts were taped off because the wood was rotted. All the other city schools have turf, metal bleachers, a press box, locker rooms, concession stands. Our field has been gone forever.

Travis's picture of Western was not flattering. He had too many other places he could compare it to, too many facts he felt jaded by. I asked him to elaborate more on the setting of the school and the impact that had on his experience. He said:

Where the school [Western] is, most schools you see you have to go up on a hill or through a nice little neighborhood, or it's like isolated. Here, we are right next to corner stores, plazas, projects, it's right on top of a busy street, right next to all the negativity. When you come out of school, you're in the hood. Anything can happen outside of school.

While it was obvious that Travis held some resentment for the situation he was in for four years, he still spoke of his time at Western with a great deal of pride and satisfaction. With so much working against him and his classmates, I asked him what positives came from his experiences at Western. He echoed the other students, boasting the advantages of learning alongside a diverse student body and also having numerous cultures represented within the school. He also felt that the teachers could “relate to the students, they get along well with all of them.” I wanted to know what graduating from Western meant to him and he said:

Graduating from Western is better than graduating from anywhere else, because you know you’ve been down a tough road. You’ve got to overcome negativity, constant negativity from inside and out. We have a lot of bad influences here. You have to overcome so much more to graduate from here than other schools. And when there’s so many people failing, just not going to classes or getting involved with street stuff, and once you’re not one of those people, that you’re a positive statistic, I guess that’s like a milestone, something you can always feel proud of.

In addition to enduring the negativity and learning from it, Travis also explained that Western’s uniqueness would assist him at the next level. He said Western was a “real life experience. Here, there’s so much more to see. Western is a real life experience. When you go to college and meet all different types of people, it’s not new. Our school was like that, we’re already so used to diversity, I guess it would seem weird if it didn’t exist.”

At the close of the interview, I asked Travis to sum up his experiences at Western. I wanted to know how he would remember his time at the school. He had been so eloquent in describing what did not exist in his four years and he finished with a sage evaluation. He said:

I had a good time. I took pride in going to Western even though most people think it's terrible. I loved Western, all four years. I loved the teachers, the coaches, the students, everybody. If I went somewhere else, I would have gotten the real high school experience. I would have gotten what everyone makes high school out to be. The dances, better lunches, big games with a lot of people in the stands, real pride, t-shirts, parties, pep rallies, posters, all that stuff. But you know what? I made it. I made it out of probably the most difficult situation of my life. I think I take more pride in that, in just surviving and graduating, then anything else. Western got me ready for the next level. It showed me how difficult life can actually be and I've never taken anything for granted. I wouldn't change a thing.

Conclusion

Daniel, Kayla, Mahima and Travis provided me with an invaluable level of insight. Their eloquence and ability to articulate the minute details of their individual experiences opened my eyes in ways I never thought possible. From Western's teachers and students, to its proximity to violence and its lack of comparable resources to other schools, the school's identity changed through their narratives. I continue to be astounded by the depth of their stories and their willingness to share. I believe that speaks volumes about the student and teacher relationships that developed at Western over such a short span. These Western graduates took their time and patiently relayed what needed to be said about a place, good or bad, that ultimately had a significant impact on their growth. The typical high school student wanders through his/her four years without ever really taking into serious consideration the ramifications of the encounter. To them, high school is just a brief holdover on the way to better things; it certainly was for me. We

hope for the same for our students, yet typically, graduation from Western is the pinnacle of most of our students' lives.

Western students have always struck me as less dreamy and more mature than students from surrounding schools. They wish for stability instead of a place on the homecoming court. Severe challenges force them to grow up much faster. Almost all of them face a grim reality, whether in school or at home or both. For the majority, Western is a beacon, a place that will not judge, a place that will accept unconditionally and try its best to help them in any capacity. These four graduates sing for the thousands of students who briefly attended Western or those who went the distance and graduated. I am grateful for their expertise and for helping further my comprehension of a place I too have called home for so many years.

Chapter IV

We Could Only Survive Together

Introduction

I began recruiting Western teachers to interview in the fall of 2014. After a few brief conversations, I realized that no one still teaching at Western would participate in the interviews. The stakes were too high. Some were clinging to their positions in the building while others were too apprehensive following leads to employment elsewhere to let a simple interview deter their progress. Others may have felt too defeated; why talk about something you absolutely cannot change? Anonymity could not sway the most steadfast proponents of the school and I surmised that only those who had left Western or the district would be willing to sit down with me and communicate their experiences. From the beginning of 2009, Western's first year on the Persistently Low Achieving list published by the New York State Education Department, many of the teachers I started teaching with had been scattered throughout the district or had left entirely. The teachers that accepted my invitation to participate in this study acknowledged the significance of their roles with even more enthusiasm than the students.

The four teachers featured in this section are some of the best in the business. They survived through the absolute lowest points of the school and hung on until there was barely anything left to grasp. In order to keep their identities anonymous, I only identify their teaching experience at Western as over or under ten years. They are all core content (English, Social Studies, Math or Science) teachers. I do not reveal their specific content expertise, age, roots, extracurricular activities they led, when they began teaching at Western or the year they left. None of these four teachers still teach at Western High School, although all of them have within

the past two years (2012-2014). All four of them left the school by their own volition. They were offered positions in other buildings as opposed to being reassigned.

Julie Graham

Julie taught at Western for under ten years before she voluntarily left and took a teaching position in another school. I remember Julie as supremely enthusiastic and involved in so many extracurricular activities it was difficult to keep track of all of them. She was talented at just about everything she tried. It was her natural warmth that drew students to her. I considered her to be an asset to the school; a teacher that I consistently learned from and someone who the students held in high regard. She may not have the quantity of teaching years that some of her colleagues had, but she was supremely dedicated and knowledgeable. I asked Julie to share one of the more memorable experiences she had at Western and she said:

I remember my first year and Bill Garcia was right next door to me. Western was a different world, I mean I didn't have much understanding of what inner city high schools were like. I had some kids, some great kids, and their experiences, their backgrounds, hearing about their lives, it just blew my mind. I just remember how Bill was so supportive and coming back to me like every day and coming in my room and checking on me. He'd ask how I was doing, how it was going and that's what really made Western home. Just the interaction between the teachers and how supportive everybody was of each other.

It's important to note that Julie is not the first, nor the last participant to identify Western

as *home*. She continues this trend, explaining how the teachers and students remained unconditionally supported by each other. I asked Julie to further explain the support she felt and she continued:

The whole staff, really. Before we started getting picked off [reassigned, terminated, recruited elsewhere] we were a family. And that's part of the problem I'm having at my new school. Western was home. Right away, even from the get go it felt good. Even with all the adversity you had to face, the challenges, you were there together. I could name dozens of teachers that I worked closely with, that helped me or allowed me to help them. The Western staff, we just all worked together. We were there for the kids. We weren't there for the paycheck, nobody would teach at Western for the paycheck. We all knew the challenges that we faced, there was no room for animosity towards each other. We could only survive together.

I asked her to elaborate on some of the challenges that she felt the school faced. Much like the students were able to convey, Julie illustrated the always-looming outside perspective of Western. She described "the look" she would observe in social or professional circles when she identified Western as her place of employment. According to Julie, people outside of Western would brand it as "dangerous," "unsafe," and the "worst of the city schools by far." One person even asked if she "wore a Kevlar vest every day?" They had difficulty comprehending how Julie worked there, based on her gender and her physical size. Julie also identified Western as the school "where every kid got dumped. Once you got expelled from another city high school, you go to Western, no question."

Julie also corroborated the viewpoints that the students gave in regards to the physical grounds where Western stood. While cheering on various athletic teams around the city, she said,

“All of the other high schools in the city have beautiful stadiums, tracks, they’re gorgeous. The kids have no illusions about what the district thinks about them.” This fact led to a much more significant sentiment, which Julie explained as:

Western has always been the black sheep of the family. It’s the one they expect to fail and I think in many ways, they set it up to fail. It was a fine circumstance before the state intervened. Keep Western the worst of them all, and the other schools will succeed. But when all the schools had to succeed? It was too late. How many times did the Superintendent step foot in our building before the phase out was announced? Once? Twice? And it was very negative each time. There was always this general feeling like we just didn’t matter.

I asked Julie if this feeling extended into the community and how the community may have reflected the school. She said:

The area is very concrete. There’s not a lot to the surrounding areas. It’s just brick and concrete, crumbling sidewalks and run down stores. There’s no nice neighborhoods nearby. I’ve driven kids home many times before. I mean like with the _____ [school activities], some kids would be there until 10 o’clock at night. We weren’t going to have them walk home. And driving, you see half the houses are boarded up, there’s trash everywhere, so they’re coming from a community that lives in high poverty and just doesn’t have that mindset or the ability to take care of their homes. There’s just a surrounding of a very hopeless feeling.

Julie’s correlation of Western’s surroundings with Western itself is important.

If public schools are reflections of the communities they exist within, it seemed illogical to assume that Western students would be able to transcend the community they returned to every

evening after school hours. But in many cases, this seemed to be the pattern for Western students who faced insurmountable odds. Julie began to reflect on the students of Western, but also the collective belief that the school was able to generate, even in the most egregious conditions. Her voice took on a completely different tone when I asked her to describe the students at Western. She said:

Look at the point that we are getting these kids in 9th grade and look at where they're leaving at as seniors. No, they don't all make it. They aren't all walking across that stage as we hoped. But the progress they made under our care was huge. These kids are remarkable. They are coming from nothing; they're coming from knowing drug dealers and gangs and waking up from a sound sleep to gun shots. Some of them have parents who don't even care about them and these are the lives they're living. Or, they're coming from other countries where they've lost family members right in front of their own eyes. They've run from bullets, even from American soldiers and they come to school and they make this progress. Yes, they have their guard up and some of them have attitudes, but when they trust you, they love you. They're like any other kids but they're never given the opportunity to be kids. They have to grow up and be adults right away and that just fuels this anger in them, rightfully so. The diversity, the beauty of all those cultures and experiences in that school...if you were gay, if you were straight, black, Hispanic, you belonged at Western.

Julie is able to balance the bleak reality of Western with the optimism that most students and teachers felt for the most part. She continued by describing her relationship with her students. She said:

I felt like the kids knew what I was there for; they knew I was there for them. Even though they'd have that guard up in the beginning, they would always open up to you. They would attach themselves to you. It was if they were asking, 'Can you be my solid point in my life?' So even though one of them was in a big time gang and one of them had just spent a whole bunch of time in jail, they were still fairly respectful. They dropped the F-bomb every two words but they were still really sweet kids. They knew Western was the one place they felt safe. They didn't feel like they were threatened or had to be somebody different.

While solidarity between students and teachers was not necessarily universal, Julie made it clear that Western teachers identified the challenges and had each other to rely on when needed. The students had numerous obstacles in their quest for success, yet the teachers and the school had an immense impact on the progress, no matter how insignificant it may have measured by state standards. I asked Julie to describe what it was like to be a Western teacher. She said:

In the beginning, it was scary. As a new teacher [Western was her first full-time teaching position], I was just trying to make it. Except for the other teachers, there wasn't a guiding light. No literacy coach, no set curriculum. It was kind of like you were dropped in and you're trying to figure out how to get these kids who can't read a lick of English, can't speak a lick of English, or are reading and writing five to six grade levels behind to pass the Regents exams or get ready for college or a career. It was very overwhelming. You wanted so badly to give them the tools to succeed, you had to fight them every day because it was so hard for them. But you would pull every bit of progress out of them using every technique you could think of. Towards the end, it was like you were always

being flooded with new things you were expected to do with no guidance or direction or understanding of how to do it. Some new test, or data, or spreadsheet or form to fill out. It was like they started keeping track of how poorly our ship was built after it started sinking.

Julie's line, "towards the end" is in reference to her time at Western and also the convergence of Western's status as a failing school, the implementation of the new Common Core State Standards in the fall of 2012 and also the New York State Education Department regulation that required students to pass all five core Regents exams in order to graduate high school in the spring of 2012. These three factors changed the school dramatically and accelerated the dismantling of the staff over a five year period from 2010-2014. Julie described the perilous climate as "a threat held above you. You always felt like if you did something wrong you were going to get in big trouble. You're going to be transferred, you're going to have to interview for your own job again, or you're getting phased out with the rest of the school. It made teaching impossible."

There is bitterness in Julie's voice that did not always exist. While she provided numerous examples of the positives of her experience at Western, her time there was cut short. She admits that she became "withdrawn" and taught "in her own little world." The countless changes at Western were swift, and Julie revealed that the staff "never saw each other anymore. We never had consistent department meetings. We didn't speak in the hallways. We didn't have that sense of family anymore."

Julie discussed the pressure that was "heaped" on to the teachers and the administration. She said:

Everything you did was wrong, everything became about a test score that most students just could not achieve. Everything was a new program you weren't trained for. The morale was just sucked out of the building; it constantly got lower and lower. Everybody started dreading coming to work. Western just wasn't the same.

Julie's comparison of her origins at Western to her conclusion reveals the immense revisions the school was subjected to over a short period of time and how it deeply affected staff members. While she did not directly address her decision to leave Western, I believe she avoided the topic altogether because it was too painful to recollect. This is concurrent with all of the teachers featured. They would rather remember Western's virtues instead of its current realities.

James Kelly

James Kelly taught at Western for over ten years. James was also heavily involved in extracurricular activities at Western and had grown up attending urban schools, giving him, which he dubbed, "an edge," when it came to educating urban youth. I asked him to reveal a memorable experience that he had as a teacher at Western, and he told me about Khan Nguyen, an ESL student from a Southeast Asian country, who mentioned Mr. Kelly by name and thanked him while giving a speech at Western's graduation a few years ago. While James was initially surprised by the acknowledgement, he said "after a moment, I realized, I worked with Khan Nguyen every day after school for about two years. He would come in my room and he was so inquisitive and he just wanted to know everything." Being new to the United States, Khan did not know any English or anything about United States' culture. James said:

Khan kept me so honest. I would have to admit when I didn't know the answers to his questions. But he was also a great gauge of how well I was doing my job. He worked so

hard, and I would sometimes have to bring him to certain knowledge every step of the way. His graduation...that was rewarding, that made all the time worth it.

James continued saying that “Khan represented much of the identity of Western.

Obviously the ESL population has increased over the last few years, giving the school a different identity, but still, he was like a microcosm of what was going on in the school.” I asked James to elaborate on this point and asked him to describe what the identity of Western as a whole was like. James said:

It [Western] always seemed to bring in students that are a larger representation of the city itself, the community and what’s actually occurring in the community. Whether it was achievements, or violence, hopes and dreams, religious values, it was just a place everyone identified with, just the heartbeat of the city. It represented what was really going on. It was raw and real, there was no fluff there. The things we studied and read about and learned, they were happening in real time.

James said that the reality of the school made it “fun” to teach there. He continued, saying that “teachable moments were always available” even right up to the moment when the school was labeled failing. I asked him to elaborate on this sense of “fun” and what it was like to be a teacher at Western and he continued:

In the beginning, we were young; we had a lot of energy. I wasn’t so far removed from my own time in high school, I still had a pretty good grasp of who these students were as people and how they learned and what they needed. I think it was fun getting to experience that from the teacher’s end, as well as learning and growing ourselves, trying to figure out and master content, hone it in a way that we could present it to kids that needed a little extra. Half of the fun was being involved in so many other things outside

of the classroom. And the classroom was really fun, I really enjoyed teaching these students because you could connect to quite a bit of kids, there weren't many kids that I didn't relate to or didn't hit it off with. I always thought that was important. I would describe it as a place where you felt like you did something positive, you felt like you made a difference. It wasn't rewarding in a way where you always knew the difference you made, but there wasn't a day where you left there and thought oh, well that was a waste of a day. Every day there you had some sort of impact; if not just on the kids then also on yourself, as a person.

James had prefaced his statement with "In the beginning," much like Julie had prefaced her final thoughts with "In the end." I asked James about the role of time in his experiences at Western and whether or not the school had changed over the course of his teaching career there. He talked about the "demands of educators that have been placed in the past four years" and also the "sweeping changes attached to paperwork after more paperwork" that took away some of the spark he and his colleagues had felt at earlier points in their career. While the requirements for graduation were changing rapidly in New York State and nationwide, teachers had to respond and act based on those changes as well. James emphasizes the importance of creativity in his lesson planning and delivery and also suggests that the adversity Western felt changed his teaching style. He said:

The pressure was on. A lot of things besides teaching took priority. Creating a lesson that was layered and thought provoking and rigorous and something you couldn't wait to challenge your students with took time, but we couldn't do that anymore. It became less of developing creative instruction and pushing kids and more about making sure you had this assessment given on this date and this data collected at this point and a meeting has

to happen here; I think that sort of drained the creativity out of it. Suddenly I stopped asking myself what the kids needed to learn and started asking myself what the kids needed to learn to pass an exam.

James indicates that one of the strengths of Western's teachers was their ability and freedom to address student need using means of their own design. Teachers became less trusted in schools that would inevitably be labeled as failing. James' perspective is essential, as he explains that he was given "the opportunity of a lifetime" when he was offered a position at Western so many years ago. He referenced his own experience in an urban school and felt that "teaching and guiding kids like me" was essential to his success. James was also quick to include the majority of his colleagues, who he described as having "found a love for educating city kids." He said that Western "demands your best effort" and that teachers "felt stronger together educating a population of students that we simply desired to work with." James added that Western "has a lot of teachers who care for the kids" and "that alone might be what has kept it afloat this far in the tumultuous times that its experienced over the last ten years."

James had offered so much pertinent information as to what it actually meant to be a Western teacher. We spent a great deal of time on this subject as he illustrated the identities of Western teachers. As he spoke, he interjected first that "whenever I see former colleagues from Western, we are still Western teachers first. I know people who haven't taught there in five years who still identify that way. That will never change." He went on to describe Western teachers as:

...battle tested. It's their experiences at the school that solidified them. They have been exposed to almost every kind of education or socioeconomic problem and moral problem you could ever experience. They've all had that in their pocket and I think it's made them better teachers as a result. These are teachers, who if given the choice, would still be

teaching at Western. The old Western. That was a time when people were still backing us and encouraging us and supporting us. And suddenly all those teachers were gone, replaced by new teachers because someone had to be blamed. Those new teachers and ultimately the students end up getting a raw deal.

Much like Julie did previously, James also mentioned the significance of the veteran teachers who were at Western when he first arrived at the school. He said his initial success came directly from the colleagues he asked for help and that in regards to teaching urban students, they were “some of the smartest people I’d ever been around.” As a veteran teacher in his final years at Western, he said he “felt guilty” that he couldn’t give the newer teachers the guidance that was given to him. He said, “I was literally trying to navigate and survive, I had no time to help the way I was helped. The newer teachers don’t have a mentor to draw ideas or help from.”

James had mentioned that students were also getting a “raw deal.” When I asked him to explain this point further, he said:

When we started it was a place where we used to see a lot of kids that came back to visit and they were so eager to tell you what they were doing. It was very rewarding to us to see some of those kids come back with their stories of success. But over the last few years you don’t see any of those kids anymore. Those kids who typically came back to see the teachers that raised them and pushed them, those teachers aren’t there anymore. Imagine going back to a school that meant so much to you, that was responsible for a major part of your education and that role model or that person that inspired you isn’t there anymore. They can’t be found in the halls of Western. And I think that affects kids more than we realize. They’re coming back to a school that they don’t recognize anymore. What message does that send to the kids? They had an experience that they

thought was very positive and one that was rewarding to them, and to come back and be able to share it with the people who had a great impact on them seems like a right. But you could argue, what about all the kids who didn't succeed and maybe didn't graduate? Those are the kids that a lot of the teachers spent time with and the way that the state and the federal government measure success is not the way that teachers measure those kids, it was very different. It's too standard, success is too standard. There's multiple ways to measure success.

James continued by discussing the dangers of only measuring "numbers, like graduation rates and test scores" as validation of a school's success. He said that his consistent motivation to teach at Western was to produce "productive citizens, ones that will care about their community and themselves, and maybe return to give back some of what they had received." He viewed Western as a benefit to the public good.

At the close of the interview, I asked James to describe his opinion or overall feelings about the Western. While he repeated his reverence for the school, the teachers, the students and the ways it made him a stronger educator, he also drew a sad reality, saying that "the needs of the community and students are changing faster than the school can accommodate." He said Western also needs "more resources" and "more attention" and that he was not positive that "those needs have ever been addressed the right way by the right people."

Caleb Martin

Caleb Martin taught at Western High School for over ten years. He was already an established veteran teacher when I arrived at Western and he was someone I felt comfortable confiding in based on his professionalism and how serious he took his position as a teacher. The

students that were interviewed all referenced Caleb as one of those memorable teachers who had an impact on them.

Caleb leapt at the opportunity to participate in this study and he contacted me numerous times to assure that he was still on the “list” to be interviewed. When we sat down to talk, he took his time and systematically answered every question. It was as if he had been waiting for years to reveal his experiences. When I asked him to discuss a memorable experience during his time as a teacher at Western, he said he valued “graduation the most” and that he could not help but get emotional every year he “watched the kids on that stage.” He said, “I know the work they [students] have put into graduating and in many cases I know the work I put into them.” When I asked him about any particular graduation ceremonies that stood out to him, he said, “probably the one in which the valedictorian spoke the year we were first put on any type of list [2006] and the Superintendent had loosely informed us that 50% of the teaching staff would be transferred. Her [the valedictorian] speech struck a nerve with me. She was very passionate in defending our school.” Caleb made me promise to include the full text of the speech (see Appendix B), which he still had a copy of, as a primary source of what it was like to be a student at Western.

I asked Caleb what it was like to be a teacher at Western, and he said he fell in love with the school “right away.” One element that stood out to him specifically were staff gatherings that took place outside of school hours that included holiday parties, sporting events and fundraisers. He said, “The majority of our staff attended these things. I mean everyone. Teachers, administrators, custodians, hall monitors..., they brought friends and spouses, but they were choosing to be with their coworkers outside of school. These events showed how much our staff cared as a group about each other and their school.”

Caleb continued to laud the staff, saying that much of his teaching strength came from “the sense of community and fellowship” that he felt daily. He said that the staff “doubled as teachers, friends, mentors and parents.” He continued:

The staff fought together for the kids and in some cases fought together against the kids. The atmosphere was contagious. I worked for seven different principals during my time at Western, there was so much administrative movement that I don’t think they deserve much credit. It was always the teachers. The best proof of that are the student observers and the student teachers that came through the building. It was always fun to watch them *convert* to being Western fans. These college kids would walk in scared to death of the halls, yet they would inevitably end up staying after school to help a room full of kids or eat lunch with students every day. It was not what they expected. Each and every one was heartbroken to leave. I think Western changed them forever.

I asked Caleb what made his experience at Western unique from other teaching experiences he had. He mentioned that he went to a suburban high school and that his relationships with his teacher appeared “business-like and not as personal.” He said:

I cannot say how many times in my career I have had students see me in public and happily greet me. Kids are so happy to have you as a part of their lives. They are thrilled to introduce you to someone as their teacher. The relationship between the students and teachers at Western is the most amazing part of the experience. A Western teacher simply means more to his or her students. I don’t think I could phrase it any other way.

I asked Caleb to describe the students at Western based on his experiences. He said that there is “something about our students that is different. Their ability to let you in is amazing.” When I asked him to elaborate on his ideas, he said:

The students always open themselves up. They are willing to give us access to their fears and secrets so we can help them heal, improve, strive and conquer. That is brave for a teenager and a huge responsibility for an adult. The things kids have told me and confided in me as a friend and an authority figure is scary. Kids who were pregnant, who were cutting themselves, being beaten at home, homeless, and on and on. They rely on us for stability and safety. That is probably what made teaching at Western so rewarding, but also so draining at the same time. One year I called Child Protective Services on five different parents of my students. My stressful day is rainbows and sunshine compared to the everyday lives of those kids. The fact that they graduate is borderline miraculous and that is not an exaggeration.

Caleb remarked how this type of conversation was difficult to have with people outside of Western's realm. He said that, "outsiders have Western's reputation pegged. It's nearly impossible to speak of the merits of the school without defending it at every turn." While he had shared an abundance of positive experiences involving Western, the negative aspects had a great impact on him and the school in general. When I asked him his opinion of the school in terms of its physical appearance and resources, he characterized it as a "piece of shit." He stated, "The walls were falling in, the fields were terrible before they disappeared. The air was awful."

From the spring of 2010 to the spring of 2013, Western underwent a multi-million dollar building renovation. A new wing was added to the school, along with updated classrooms and a repurposed gymnasium. Along with this renovation was an athletic complex, complete with a new stadium, field turf, lights, a concession stand and locker rooms for home and visiting teams. This has yet to occur at the school, a fact that most participants mentioned in their interviews. The creation of a new athletic complex was mentioned by the Mayor, the Superintendent and

other local officials. Caleb spoke at length about the renovation and the significance of what it did not include. He said:

The renovation was a farce. While it may just be a conspiracy theory of an ex-Western teacher, the new Western never showed any signs of the district planning on keeping it open. If you look at all the other high schools in the district that were renovated in the past decade, their school colors and logos and name are everywhere. Western has nothing, it's neutral colors. The lockers are grey. I was shocked that they put the school name on the gym floor when it was redone. They did not put it on the bleachers, which they did at every other high school. The athletic fields? Torn up during renovation, never to be seen again. It points to district apathy towards Western. A lack of school spirit and identity can be traced to having no home for our athletes. Even our fantastic soccer team had no home stadium. When you travel to other schools, you see facilities, logos, colors. When you travel to Western, you literally see nothing.

Caleb's assertions about the physical school are similar to what other respondents have shared. I asked Caleb to describe his time at the school. He veered towards the last few years, which became more "difficult" as he explained, because he never saw himself leaving Western. He "enjoyed the struggle and the battle and the failures and successes." He said he "watched many good friends leave, yet I stayed, even when I had to re-interview for my own job. For me, it was always about the kids." He described his time at Western as "fantastic" and that he "cherished the students who would always frame his time at the school." His decision to leave was "probably more difficult than people expect. I had resolved time and time again to remain at Western, even when it got really bad." It was not until district officials revealed to the Western staff that the phase out process would more than likely include a complete overhaul of the

teaching staff that Caleb decided he had to leave the school. He said “It still pisses me off what they did to our building. We could have continued to do great things if they would just give us the support and let us be. It turned into a numbers game that Western could never win.”

Caleb’s feelings towards leaving Western are reverberated by his colleagues, most of whom still speak of the school with a sense of nostalgia and longing. He ended the interview by explaining the day he was hired at Western and how that moment revealed his true intentions as a lifelong educator. He said:

I was offered the job at Western in August of 19___. Later that afternoon I was offered the same position at a different suburban school. The next morning I was offered a position at a third school. All teaching the same subject at the same grade level. It has always been my philosophy that if you went into teaching to help kids, you should teach where the kids need most help. That is my belief. I chose Western. The vice-principals at both of the other schools called and asked me what happened. They couldn’t understand why I picked Western over them. They will never understand what we know. Western is a special place.

Gerald Nugent

Gerald Nugent taught at Western High School for over ten years before he left the school for a teaching position in another building. He describes himself as a “passionate urban educator. Someone who took the position seriously, like most everyone else I worked with.” Gerald opened the conversation with his own academic experiences in an urban district. He said “I never realized it then, but those teachers I had in school, the ones who cared, the ones who called home, the ones who kept in contact with me for years after I left, man, they fanned the flames.

They made me the teacher that I am today.” He said that Western teachers were “very similar, if not the same” as those who impacted his early educational experiences.

I asked Gerald about a memorable experience he had as a teacher at Western. He sat in thought for a moment and said “there were so many of those, like daily. Mostly good, some bad, but in the end I have been brought to tears too many times to recount.” I asked him to explain one of those emotional events in specifics and he said:

When I first started as a teacher, everyone told me to get involved. Coach, volunteer, go to meetings, do more than what they expect so they’ll keep you on. This was back when people were going years trying to find teaching jobs. I don’t know if it’s like that anymore. So at Western, I coached sports I never played. I went to so many meetings I started confusing the acronyms. I tutored, subbed for other teachers, whatever it took. Sometimes the drama department would ask teachers to take on roles in the school plays or musicals. Maybe there weren’t enough kids, or it was easier to direct adults, who knows. I said yes and played a small part. My wife used to tease me and say I was taking parts from the kids. But that wasn’t it. I knew if I didn’t help, it might not happen. So I spent weeks with these students, rehearsing until 10, chipping in for food, driving kids home, helping with lines and accents and stage presence. It was as frustrating as it was hilarious. The director yelled at me and also leaned on me. I felt like I was so needed. Anyway, opening night. I am nervous, my whole family is there like I was a student. We nailed it. It was amazing. The kids performed to the best of their ability and afterwards after the clapping stopped, backstage was just electric. They couldn’t believe what they had just done. I drove home exhausted, and had to go back to teach in like eight hours. And I went inside and saw my wife and I just bawled my eyes out. I cried

and cried for those kids. I was just so proud. So proud. They did something no one ever thought they could do. I felt so validated. I knew that after that night, Western was not the school I just worked at. It had become so much more than that.

Gerald continued explaining events that impacted him, including students being arrested or simply disappearing from his roster. I asked him what it was like to be a teacher at Western and he explained that it was “impossible at times, yet completely engaging at others.” He said:

Administrators used to leave so much up to us [teachers]. Keep the kids in class, that’s your goal. I would take suggestions from the kids, explore them and teach them the next day. We learned some revolutionary stuff. I was at my best in those years, strong, confident, assured that they [students] were getting more from me than from whoever else they could have hired. Every day I had kids staying after, working and working. It wasn’t always so great. I had kids threaten me, scream at me, I mean it’s not like the movies. I didn’t want teaching in the city to become a novelty or something I had just done for a while and moved on. Many people outside of Western asked if I was pursuing jobs elsewhere. I couldn’t even fathom leaving. I got better and smarter and more sensitive to needs every day I was there. The belief was always that if you could be successful at Western, you could be successful anywhere. Well, I didn’t want anywhere, I wanted Western. I loved it.

Gerald was adamant that he learned as much from the students as they may have learned from him. He said that teaching at Western was, “like a dream. We used to joke with each other that it was impossible to be bored at Western. Someone always needed help or advice, or they just needed you. We held a tremendous power, but not like a typical teacher over student power. We were changing young peoples’ lives.”

I asked Gerald to describe the students at Western and he said they were “survivors, with a superior grasp of reality.” He compared their lives to his own, explaining that seemingly significant issues paled in comparison to what some of his students experienced as young people. He said:

Every one of those kids had a story and sometimes they would gather strength from each other. You’d have a kid talking about his dad in jail and another one would pipe in, saying she hadn’t seen her dad in a decade. They grew confident in themselves through each other’s terrible realities. I mean there are stories we all have that we would only share with other Western teachers. I have friends that teach in other schools and they may talk about a disgruntled parent on the phone or a kid who continuously skipped class. And in my head I’m like, I’ve seen parents try to assault our principal. I had a student whose infant daughter was beaten to death by her boyfriend. I had a student with a gunshot wound whose mother was killed by rebel soldiers in the Congo. Our students, you can’t even begin to compare their life experiences, their tragedies. They make it on so many levels. Sometimes, the fact that they are even there, breathing in class is astonishing. And they are so nonchalant about it, like yeah some guy got killed down the street from me last night. Can you help me with this assignment?

Gerald continued, saying that Western was unique to other schools because the students were so diverse. He said that it was “more than just color or culture, it was who they were and their willingness to share their stories.” Gerald also said that diverse classes helped “facilitate a kind of sorry solidarity. These kids knew violence and heartache. It’s like they could trust each other even if they didn’t know each other’s names.” Gerald also added that “everyone at

Western, teachers, students, we just belonged to something. I don't know exactly what that something was. Do I even want to know?"

Gerald's experiences were framed through a true appreciation of what Western had provided him. In addition to the students, Gerald repeatedly mentioned the staff he taught with, particularly the veteran teachers who helped him through the early part of his career. He said that they "gave him a voice, not unlike the voice we were trying to give the students." Gerald heaped praise on his colleagues, noting those who "had students in terrible situations come and live with them. These kids literally moved into their teachers' homes, ate their food, became part of the family. That didn't happen once, I'm talking like a bunch of times. That's special." When I asked him to continue he said:

Western teachers will always be Western teachers. We shared the same collective community that the students did. How could we not? I trusted these people, I mean like I trusted their judgment, their abilities. And they were a diverse group too, not all of these city teachers went to city schools. But Western was this common denominator, we all groaned through so much, especially in the changes, because we knew what was best. We knew how to reach the students, and to connect. We made them the best they could be and vice versa. It's so easy to give up on a student, to just say fuck it, he or she doesn't care, so why should I? But each of those kids had a favorite teacher, had a place to eat lunch, had a class they truly enjoyed. And soon I was walking past classrooms without those same teachers. Those rocks, the people the school was built on, the teachers I wanted to be like, they were gone.

As the interview came to a close, I asked Gerald to describe his time in the school and his overall opinion of his experiences teaching at Western. He said he had been depressed since

leaving the building and that he “hadn’t found that same spark” in his subsequent teaching placement. When I asked him why, he said:

It’s no secret that we were the worst performing school for miles and miles. We had that designation, even before the state or the government started keeping track. And for a while I took that personally. While I never labeled myself a failure, others made me feel like one. Our staff meetings were taken over by experts, and data-driven graphs, and we were told that the kids were doing poorly because we hadn’t expressed our learning goals enough and that my lesson plans weren’t detailed enough. It got to be...you know, I dreaded leaving my classroom. Every second you were being watched and graded and assessed by people who had no association with the building, no background or real experience in what we were doing. You know who never made me feel like a failure? My students. My colleagues. Every morning when I swiped my I.D. card and that ugly steel door opened, I was home. I can’t describe it any other way.

Gerald finished the interview by thanking me for the opportunity to speak openly about Western “without judgment.” He said he had never described his time at Western without “interference from the listener. They ask a question and usually answer it themselves.”

Conclusion

Julie, James, Caleb and Gerald exemplify some of the most important qualities necessary to successful public school teachers. Their collective intensity throughout the interviews struck me and was symbolic of how much they cared for their time at Western. Removed from the school, they felt confident speaking freely and also had the luxury of additional time to assess what they had experienced. Most teachers form a portion of their identity around their career

path, yet Western appears to have had a greater significance in their lives than other schools may have. It would be interesting to conduct these same interviews with teachers from around the district or even outside of it to assess common themes that emerge among teachers in various institutions and compare them with teachers in schools in dire circumstances.

In our conversations since their departure from Western, these teachers have individually expressed a longing to return to the school as it once was. As Julie explicitly referenced and the others have in passing, their new buildings do not have the same feel as Western. Their desire to remain teaching at Western was usurped by familial obligations and the desire to dictate their own career path before it was selected for them by the school and/or district administration. I would not characterize their lamentations as regretful of their decision to leave the school, yet more about the decisions of others that made them feel as if they had to leave. They wonder what to do with the collection of Western t-shirts they have amassed over the years and discuss nostalgically “the good old days.” The phase out of Western hurt them more than they believed it would. Every teacher has those days of instruction they would like to forget and towards the end of their time at Western, those days began to accumulate more than any of us would like to admit. For these teachers, Western exists as a school where they honed their craft, tried their best, but ultimately, in the eyes of everyone outside of the school, failed to make a significant impact on the lives of their students. Fortunately, that is not how they remember it.

Chapter V

The End of an Era

The undertaking of this project has been hugely personal for me. While I was able to sit down and reminisce with colleagues and former students over the best and worst of times at Western High School, I was also brought to overwhelming levels of emotion and a sense of loss over what happened to a place where I truly enjoyed teaching. While not necessarily a eulogy, this project has given me the much needed closure (no pun intended) I was hoping for, as one chapter of my professional life has concluded and another has begun.

In June of 2015, I joined the throng of colleagues who left Western High School and made my way into the halls of another high school within the district. While I agonized over the decision, I realized that too much was at stake for me to satisfy my own needs by staying at Western for its final two years while having no idea where I would end up after its full closure. There were conversations about Western teachers absorbing into the new school, yet no final decision had been made by the New York State Education Department pertaining to that specific conflict of interest. It would appear that allowing Western teachers to work in the newly formed school would defeat the purpose of the phase in/phase out. After I accepted a teaching position elsewhere within the district, I heard about colleagues who had elected to stay on at Western splitting teaching time between different schools, while others were haphazardly moved throughout the district due to declining enrollment at Western. I believe that some upperclassmen viewed the ambiguity of their futures at Western the same way their teachers did and they decided to transfer to other schools to assure themselves some scrap of familiarity in their remaining high school years.

I would characterize my own decision to leave Western in this same manner. I chose stability and comfort, mainly for my family's sake, over what I knew in my heart I actually wanted. Leading up to my decision, I felt like a member of the four-man string quartet facing certain death as portrayed in the 1997 film, *Titanic*. I wanted to go down with the ship, teaching right up until the end.

My job had been subtly threatened enough times that tangible fear had taken over optimistic teaching. I left school dozens of times through my past three years at Western believing that my position could be terminated the following day. Inadequate lesson plans, insufficient student data, lack of classroom postings, improperly phrased questions, inattention to established curricula; the expectations for perceived success grew so fast that any adult entering my classroom instantly sent an apprehensive shiver up my spine. In earlier times I may have engaged the visiting teacher or interested administrator with a question previously posed to the class or some compelling element of the lesson. That changed to an unconscious belief that I had erred in some abysmal fashion and that this person was present to deliver the final blow to my career. These thoughts led to sleepless nights where I concocted scenarios of joblessness, wandering back to former employers, working nights to provide for my growing family and responsibilities. While I still believed in my ability to incite passion and production from my Western students, I feared the ever growing expectation of deficiency at the school. Those evaluative visits from state and district officials would have elicited failing data no matter how hard the teachers and students attempted to change things. Failure, implied or existing, had to be snuffed out and eradicated no matter the circumstances. And I did not want to fail.

In January 2016, John B. King Jr., the New York State Commissioner of Education from 2011-2015 and current Acting Deputy Secretary of Education of the United States, apologized to

public school teachers at Philadelphia's School of the Future (partially funded by Microsoft), explaining that "teachers and principals have felt attacked and unfairly blamed for the challenges our nation faces as we strive to improve outcomes for all students" (qtd. in Camera 1). Dr. King had become the face of the enemy of public schools during his tenure in New York, scapegoated by angry teachers, parents and students as he had "managed the rollout of the Common Core standards and a new teacher-rating system that for the first time factored in student test scores" (Decker et. Al 1). The highest-ranking advocate of correlating test and graduation scores to teacher evaluations and school statuses in New York State was now apologizing for the negative impact these policies may have had on the nation's teachers. His regret was met with resentment, as his policies circumvented the rationale that student test scores had little to no correlation with effective teaching (Shavelson et.al) and that almost every public school in the United States had felt some residual burden when it came to creating fair teacher evaluations. Even New York State Governor Cuomo has been "quietly pushing for a reduction" (Taylor 1) in the percentage that student test scores ultimately weigh in teacher evaluations and school statuses after facing a tremendous backlash against testing orchestrated by teacher and parent groups across the state.

In an effort to produce instant success, knee-jerk policies enacted by politicians far from failing schools have sought to not only identify deficiencies, but to raucously brandish irreversible labels that forever shamed institutions that typically shouldered a burden too large to obtain even a modest amount of success with their allocated resources. It is impossible to pin school failure on any one identifiable faction. The Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) was a "lawsuit brought by parents against the State of New York claiming that children were not being provided an opportunity to an adequate education" (Marcou-O'Malley 4). In 2006, The New York State Court of Appeals "ruled in favor of CFE" and found that New York State was

severely underfunding its schools (Marcou-O'Malley 4). In 2010 and 2011, New York State Governors Patterson and Cuomo "cut \$2.7 billion from state aid to schools with the commitment it would be reinstated at a later date" (Marcou-O'Malley 4). To date, this funding has never been replenished, leaving Western's district over \$60 million short in state aid over the last ten years (Marcou-O'Malley 9).

Did the lack of equitable funding for a decade close Western High School? It certainly did not help its situation. In the tumult of addressing culpability regarding school failure, the New York State Government was given a free pass. The scathing articles, the spiteful designations, and the devastating consequences were reserved specifically for failing teachers and students, not the authors of the state budget who were quick to redirect any animosity back on those they were palpably underfunding. It is essential that all players take credit for success, and also absorb the brunt of probable shortcomings. As Mahima Shanti told me during her interview, "Someone has to finish last."

Western High School had every odd stacked against it from the moment it opened. It served the highest-need population of students in its county for five decades. Within its walls, diminutive success was measured against assured misfortune. Students who entered Western High School under grade level in math and reading skills were automatically at risk for not graduating. Students who entered Western High School with an inconsistent living situation, had a parent incarcerated, or had been neglected for the majority of their lives found their academic success almost unreachable. The absence of achievement was the primary belief that Western tried to limit inside of its walls. Unfortunately, the decayed and bleak outside, with no athletic complex and no pride too often won the battle. The media, the state and the outlying communities had no reasons to believe in Western. They characterized the school based on its

numbers, what they heard and what they thought they knew. The teachers and students who participated in this study obviously recognized Western's vast array of complications; yet, their attention to the factors that genuinely impacted success should also be considered. Their portrayal of Western (juxtaposed with everyone else's) offers vital insight into the realm of a high-needs public school.

This study first and foremost introduces the essential component of shared failure. A teacher is not solely responsible for a student's lack of success in the same way a student is not solely responsible for his/her school performance. Low-performing schools need a community effort to revitalize. They do not need additional conflict, negativity and damning labels. If I addressed my own students as "failures," told them that they were "broken" or suggested that "the death penalty" was a tangible solution for their situation, I would not be teaching for very long. Yet that is the harmful message that is conveyed to them from every angle except their school. This mindset does not assist their already tumultuous position.

Through this study, we have witnessed a much different point of view from the major players at Western High School. The teachers used vocabulary like, "progress," "success," "reassurance," and "proud." The students called their teachers "inspiring," "caring" and "there for them." How many times did a participant refer to Western as "home"? How many examples of a positive relationship were revealed by both students and teachers? Who do the students trust? Which teachers have elected to remain in the school knowing the risk it may impose? For students and teachers in a high-needs school to be successful, these are the types of questions and data that need a stronger emphasis when it comes to assistance and decision making. If students are the intended benefactors of sweeping educational reforms, why is their input hardly considered?

Low-performing schools are not evil. The students in these schools are intelligent and their teachers are capable. What is not included in the conversation about low-performing schools, at least for decision-making purposes, are the dozens of other factors that play enormously into a student's ability to succeed. Budgets, community, home life, learning styles, adequate transportation, familial responsibilities...the list literally goes on forever. How can the nation improve these conditions, thus paving the way for accelerated academic achievement?

One element of school failure that was not indicated by the students was that their teachers contributed to their lack of academic progress. That is not to say that poor teachers do not exist, because they certainly do. However, poor teaching is not the epidemic that it has been portrayed as in recent years. If President Obama's Race to the Top only targets the lowest 5% of public schools based on academic performance, surely more attention and care can be delivered to the solutions offered for these schools. Kicking highly-esteemed, compassionate educators who have chosen their position within difficult schools out the door seems counterproductive to the true nature of school reform. Cooperation has ceased, and the finger pointing has commenced. While this qualitative study only examined the narratives of eight participants (nine including the author) within a low-performing school, the reader must decide the significance of the study. Were you convinced, and if so, what were you convinced of? Was your mind changed to any degree about the merits of low-performing schools? Are there elements that should be treasured? Are there components that need to be reworked?

The cultivation of a positive student/teacher relationship takes time; a concept that is not valued in current educational policy. It takes time to care, time to understand and time to trust. Perhaps that is the essential component of school reform that is missing. The time limits set on implementation, positive data and target scores always felt too short. It took time for the school

to fall to substandard; perhaps it needed the same amount of time to rebound. Time was what Western ran out of. Even though time now separates former Western students and teachers from their experiences within the school, time does not appear to have changed their attitudes towards those experiences. This is reflected heavily within the student and teacher narratives of this study, whose purpose was to bring the reader as close as possible to a school that once existed, that had a name and had students and teachers who loved it.

I will close with my own revelations of Western High School, especially since I have left the school and continued my career elsewhere, a fact that I never would have believed could happen. My new school, located within Western's same school district, employs a significant number of former Western teachers who found themselves as prized commodities as Western's impending closure became inevitable. We became implicit nobility. See, Western teachers are the best of the best. We are revered within the district for our professionalism, our knowledge of demanding students, and our ability to venture far beyond what is expected of us in and out of the classroom. Western teachers were the first to be snatched up once they declared themselves eligible for a transfer. This covetousness did not breed arrogance; but, it did validate our proficiency. It felt great to be wanted again.

And in the copy room, or the parking lot, or the grocery store, I am constantly reminded of Western. There is no digression from my true feelings; I did not want to leave. I speak about Western lovingly, compassionately, and longingly for the days before so many decisions were wrenched from my hands. I speak of Western as an experience never to be replicated, and losing it has become a wound that will most likely never heal. I celebrate the initial successes of the new phased-in school and hope that the veteran and new staff members are given every opportunity to continue their craft. I lament the fact that I voluntarily left the school, mainly

because no matter how the situation is framed, I cannot help but feel that I abandoned Western when it needed me most. Walking out of those doors for the last time in June of 2015, I knew I was not making the decision for myself. I left the school out of cowardice; out of fear for my family's future and my career. I left the school for all the right reasons, except for the only one that truly mattered. I live with that guilt daily. When I am driving my growing children past Western on the way to some event, they still yell out, "Daddy, there's your school!" When I see old students who ask me how Western is, I sheepishly admit my current situation. Sometimes I blurt out my rationale, explaining in earnest that the choice was not mine to make. Other times I swallow my pride and talk excitedly about my new school.

In June of 2017, the last graduating class of Western High School will walk across the stage. After that, Western will only exist as a memory, growing more distant with each passing year. I wonder what will happen to the school's trophies, to the few banners hanging in the gymnasium, to the collection of yearbooks on a shelf in the library. I wonder if the complete phase-out will be celebrated, as if some dreadful enemy has finally been defeated. Will there be cake? No matter how long I am employed elsewhere, or how far removed I am from my time there, I will forever and always remain a Western teacher.

Appendix A: Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness (DTSDE) Report of Western High School (October 2013)

#	Statement of Practice	H	E	D	I
2.3	Leaders make strategic decisions to organize programmatic, human, and fiscal capital resources.			X	
2.5	Leaders effectively use evidence-based systems and structures to examine and improve critical individual and school-wide practices as defined in the SCEP (student achievement, curriculum and teacher practices; leadership development; community/family engagement; and student social and emotional developmental health).			X	
3.2	The school leader ensures and supports the quality implementation of a systematic plan of rigorous and coherent curricula appropriately aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) that is monitored and adapted to meet the needs of students.			X	
3.3	Teachers develop and ensure that unit and lesson plans used include data-driven instruction (DDI) protocols that are appropriately aligned to the CCLS and NYS content standards and address student achievement needs.			X	
4.3	Teachers provide coherent, and appropriately aligned Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS)-based instruction that leads to multiple points of access for all students.			X	
5.4	All school stakeholders work together to develop a common understanding of the importance of their contributions in creating a school community that is safe, conducive to learning, and fostering of a sense of ownership for providing social and emotional developmental health supports tied to the school's vision.			X	
6.5	The school shares data in a way that promotes dialogue among parents, students, and school community members centered on student learning and success and encourages and empowers families to understand and use data to advocate for appropriate support services for their children.			X	

Appendix B: Western High School's Valedictory Address (June 2006)

First off, I'd like to say congratulations to the class of 2006! It's been a long hard road to get to this point, but standing here on this stage makes it all worthwhile. Since the first day I started school, I've looked forward to this day, always viewing it as the end, but standing here now I realize I was wrong. Graduation is not the end of the road; it is really only the beginning. This day marks the beginning of a new chapter in all of our lives. It is the time where we must all step out on our own and discover who we really are.

I want to take a moment to address all of the misconceptions about Western High School. You see our name in the media constantly and there's always a negative stigma attached. The media focuses on things such as our SURR status and the fact that we've been classified as a violent school. Because of this, a lot of people have doubted us, but every student standing on this stage right now has proved them wrong. These students embody everything that is right with Western High School and these are the ones that should be talked about because they have worked hard and stayed focused regardless of what the media said about them. These students are all incredibly bright and will make a difference wherever they go. That's what makes graduating a bittersweet moment. I'm happy to be moving on, but it will be difficult leaving behind all of these wonderful people. I've known some of these people for years and saying goodbye is one of the hardest things I'll ever have to do. I want to thank all of the teachers and staff who have been there to inspire us and who never gave up on us no matter how hard things got. Your dedication is what gave us the motivation to continue forward, even when some of us felt like just giving up.

I want to leave the class with a quote from Oh the Places You'll Go by Dr. Seuss. "Congratulations! Today is your day. You're off to great places! You're off and away! You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes, you can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own and you know what you know. And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go!" And to all of the skeptics in the media, off we go to places like _____, _____ University, _____ College, and many others. Why don't you print that on the front page of your papers!

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